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ABSTRACT

This book examines the various kinds of student support provided by institutions of higher education, and is written mostly from the perspective of the British university system. It takes the point of view that assistance is not an extra or supplement to the educational experience, but is in fact an integral element of the educational process. Part 1 of the book is concerned with the students experience--the experience of: problems, development, transitions, and how the student experience has changed--all framed within an interpersonal and social context. Part 2 examines the issues from the perspective of the tutor. It deals with the nature of the tutor's role and relationship between tutor and student, use and abuse of power, confidentiality, professional responsibility, and the difficulties and ambiguities of the tutor's role. Part 3 examines institutional policy--how institutions can best provide support for students. It gives examples of institutional support, discusses pastoral care and counseling, discusses alternative models of support--via the curriculum, the workplace, peers, and groups. The book encourages tutors to experiment and innovate, and suggests that institutions examine their support systems to find ways to integrate them into the larger institutional framework. (Contains 45 references.) (JLS)

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Helping and Supporting Students

Rethinking the Issues

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Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgements	xi
Part 1: The Student Experience	1
1 The Experience of Problems	3
Four case studies	3
Unravelling problems	6
Problems in the early stages	8
Typical student problems	9
2 The Experience of Development	12
Development as a person	13
Development as a student	15
Development in relation to specific occupations	17
Complex pathways of development	19
3 The Experience of Transition	22
Metaphors of change	23
Adjustment	24
Socialization	26
Transition	29
4 The Changing Student Experience	33
Past and present	33
Representation and reality	37
Explaining change	38
Solidarity and diversity	39
Part 2: Tutorial Support	43
5 The Tutor's Point of View	45
The tutoring experience: an investigation	46
The contribution of tutors to student support	47

vi *Helping and Supporting Students*

Tutors' feelings about their support role	49
Sources of role strain	51
6 The Tutorial Relationship	55
Interviewing, counselling and tutoring	56
The tutorial: its agenda and its management	58
The use and abuse of power	61
The paradox of helping	65
7 Confidentiality	68
Dealing with sensitive information	68
Privacy, secrecy and confidentiality	71
Confidentiality: a five-dimensional model	73
Professional responsibility	74
8 The Tutor's Role	78
Front-line support	78
Roles and relationships	79
Setting boundaries	81
Referral	83
Part 3: Institutional Policy	89
9 Patterns of Provision	91
Examples of institutional provision	91
Discussion	94
Improving current provision	98
10 'Pastoral Care' and 'Counselling'	101
The British tradition of higher education	102
The idea of pastoral care	106
The counselling model	108
11 Alternative Models of Support Provision	113
Support provision via the curriculum	115
Workplace welfare	119
Peer support and group-building	120
12 Rethinking Student Support	124
Students' need for support	124
The institution's responsibility for provision	127
Rethinking institutional provision	130
References	135
Index	137
The Society for Research in Higher Education	142

Preface

I should like to explain how this book came to be written. The matters discussed here are issues I have lived with in my own working life as I have tried, over many years, to offer students appropriate help and support. Although I make reference, throughout the book, to a number of writers whose ideas have helped me to make sense of my work, what is written here comes directly from my own situation and my reflection upon it. I am writing out of experience, not out of other books.

Within my own institution I fulfil a double role. As a member of an academic department I play a full part in teaching, course planning, course leadership and administration, and in giving my students the tutorial support they need within that context. At the same time, as Polytechnic Chaplain, I belong to a team of people specifically designated to provide a back-up support service throughout the institution. I thereby attempt to straddle a most interesting divide. To move repeatedly across this boundary, perhaps several times in a day, is to gain practice in looking at the institution through two eyes. Yet the two roles are very different and any attempt to combine them is necessarily fraught with contradictions. For example, academic credibility does not sit easily with counselling accessibility; the one may easily be sacrificed for or achieved at the expense of the other.

Of course, every lecturer experiences tensions between teaching, examining and supporting students. There is a long tradition, too, of college chaplains having a teaching role. Why then do I feel my role to be so special? To answer that question is to anticipate some of the arguments of this book. Briefly, it has to do with the institutional context and the ideological framework within which I work. The clergyman-scholar in an Oxford college can, even now, take for granted certain assumptions about pastoral care which offer a coherent, if somewhat anachronistic framework within which to work. However, to work in a thoroughly modern, secular, bureaucratic, specialized and managerially-run institution, which is used to separating out distinct functions, dividing up responsibilities and assigning specific roles, and to have a foot in each of two very different camps, is a quite different experience.

It is from this experience that I write, confident that what from one point of view might be seen as a predicament, or as a difficult balancing act, may

also be seen positively as a uniquely privileged position from which to consider the task of helping and supporting students.

The fact that I have worked in the same institution for over 20 years is misleading. It is not the same institution. What I joined as a College of Education with rather more than a thousand students has become one of the largest higher education institutions in Great Britain. My initial role in teacher training was followed by a period of teaching social studies to a much wider range of students. At the same time, my chaplaincy role brought me into contact with a cross-section of the whole institution. I began to discover just how sheltered my previous experience had been.

Like many teaching staff, I imagined that many students must find such a large institution daunting and perhaps alienating; that they might be lonely, anxious and afraid; and that they would appreciate it if someone was willing to befriend them, offer practical help and possibly some advice as well. That, of course, is all true, but it is not the whole truth. As part of the student support services I have found myself caught up in problems more severe and more complicated than I had experienced in my parish ministry. Drug addiction I had read about, but not encountered first hand. I knew about alcoholism, but I did not expect to be visiting in hospital members of staff who were 'drying out'. In four years of parish experience I had never had to visit a prison and only once faced someone who threatened suicide. Yet within months of undertaking chaplaincy work in higher education I had come up against almost every problem imaginable. I was startled and shocked. It was as if I was seeing below the surface of the institution, discovering all the things usually kept hidden.

The idea for this book began to take shape during a short period of secondment when I conducted an investigation into tutorial support within the institution. There was widespread concern that the previous arrangements could not be sustained and that students were not getting the help and support they needed. My suspicion was that a small number of staff (particularly First Year Tutors, of whom I was one) were, in fact, ensuring that this did not happen, but at considerable personal cost to themselves. An account of this investigation appears in Chapter 5. The point to notice here is that this raised questions about the role of the tutor in student support, which has become a major theme of this book.

I began to provide opportunities for colleagues to come together to discuss these issues, and these consultations later developed into a year-long course for interested staff. This was, in turn, incorporated into a wider programme of in-house staff development which has since become part of a Masters programme. In all this I have found surprisingly little help from published literature. While there are many books which give practical guidance on how to give help to others in a quasi-counselling context, there are very few attempts to deal with the underlying issues as they confront a lecturer who is concerned to be helpful to his or her students; and there are none, so far as I know, which challenge the prevailing conception of student support as ancillary to the main task of higher education.

It will now be clear why I had to sketch something of the background in order to explain how this book came to be written. After a great deal of discussion with colleagues in my own and other institutions it has gradually become clear to me that this whole area of work requires much more radical rethinking than it has so far received. It is not, as is commonly supposed, just a matter of resourcing; we need to be much clearer about what we need the resourcing for.

My ideas have gradually taken shape around the headings of 'students', 'tutors' and 'institutions', and this three-fold framework is reflected in the structure of the book.

Part 1 of the book, Chapters 1–4, may be seen as a series of widening circles. It seems obvious that one should start by looking at students and their problems; yet further reflection suggests that this may not be such a good starting-point, in that it implies that our concerns are remedial only. We then look at students and their development, and discover that, while this approach is refreshingly positive, it still focuses too much on the individual and is liable to ignore the interpersonal and social dimensions of experience. The third chapter considers the way in which people make the transition into (and out of) the student state, finding it necessary here to take an explicitly psycho-social approach. Finally, we look at wider social changes which have affected the character of student life, trying to set current concerns in a broader historical context.

Part 2, Chapters 5–8, tackles the issues from the perspective of the tutor. Here I have evidence to offer, drawn from interviews with some of my colleagues; this forms the starting-point of this section. In the light of this I then go on to discuss the tutorial relationship (and in particular, ways in which it may go wrong, so that efforts at helping turn out to be counter-productive), the thorny problem of confidentiality and the limits of the tutor's role. Throughout this section I take for granted what elsewhere might be much more problematic: the tutors' commitment to helping and supporting students in this way.

In Part 3, Chapters 9–12, I look at the question of how institutions can best provide support for students. Here, I develop the thesis that two powerful sets of ideas have been at work and have had the effect of distorting a great deal of our effort in this area. I try to open up a number of other possible approaches, while at the same time insisting that student support should be seen as a whole, that it belongs within the educational task and that the role of the tutor is crucial.

Throughout the book I use a variety of strategies to link the ideas with actual experience. I offer case studies, cameos and vignettes as well as referring to real life stories, to exemplify specific issues. I am aware, of course, that stereotypes can be dangerous; they can also be extremely useful in throwing into relief the implications of our beliefs and attitudes. The purpose in each case is to illustrate a particular point, no more.

I am conscious that the book rests on a great deal of personal experience as a chaplain, a teacher and a tutor with administrative responsibilities. It also

rests in a rather special way on my research into the work of some particularly conscientious tutors in my own institution; on the staff training courses for which I have been responsible; and on my input into my own institution's developing policies in this area. This doubtless gives it a particular slant. I am very aware, for instance, that while I have undertaken some first-hand investigation of the perceptions of staff involved in student support, this book does not rely on any comparable direct investigation of student perceptions of their own experience. Thus, it is very much a personal statement, written from a particular point of view.

What runs through the book is, I hope, a strong line of my own. To a large extent it is coloured by my double role in combining an academic teaching appointment with my chaplaincy work. I am, therefore, able to see, in a way which is open to very few colleagues, the necessity to hold together these two aspects of our work. The theme to which I keep returning is that helping and supporting students is not some kind of 'extra' which may be tacked on as supplementary to the educational experience, but an integral element in the educational process.

Acknowledgements

More than anything else, my continuing contact with students is what has made this book possible. I am grateful to them for the way in which they have let me into their lives and allowed me to share some of their practical, intellectual and personal struggles.

More directly, I am indebted to colleagues, too numerous to mention, with whom I have discussed these ideas on many occasions. In particular, those involved with my course on Student Support have helped me to think through these issues. Special thanks are due to the University of South Carolina and, in particular, to Professor John Gardner and his team for their gracious hospitality in the Spring of 1989.

Four people read the whole book through in draft form before publication: Peter Ashworth and David Clark of Sheffield City Polytechnic, Elaine Graham of Manchester University and Mark Greengrass of Sheffield University. They are all friends whose opinions I value and whose judgement I trust. Their comments have been extremely valuable in the closing stages of putting the book together.

Lastly, and most of all, thanks to my wife Janet for the way she has given help and support to me.

Part 1

The Student Experience

1

The Experience of Problems

As the proportion of students in the population rises and institutions of higher education grow in size, there is a real risk that the individuals with particular needs and difficulties will disappear from view. Students have always had problems, but current trends mean that they may now be more acute, harder to alleviate and perhaps more difficult to identify. There are more mature students returning to study after substantial experience of employment, often bringing with them various personal and domestic difficulties. There are more students from overseas, whose diverse cultures and different expectations may clash quite sharply with what is offered here. Home-based students, on the other hand, are finding it ever harder to establish their own independence. Thus our higher education institutions, under growing pressure to be cost-effective, have to respond to a widening range of student needs.

These current strains only serve to exacerbate what is at any time a rather stressful existence. Even at the best of times students confront difficulties which they may be unable to handle alone. These problems will be of many different kinds, ranging from the ordinary troubles of daily living (e.g. physical health, accommodation, finance, relationships) to major crises (e.g. accidents, injuries, bereavement, mental breakdown, suicide), plus a further set of problems more specifically associated with student life (e.g. academic difficulties, study problems, course choice, career decisions).

Suppose we begin by looking closely at some of the actual problems students experience? The following case studies outline the predicaments faced by four fairly ordinary full-time students. We may call them Adrian, Barry, Christine and Denise.

Four case studies

Adrian, aged 19, is in his first term reading Business Studies. His father is a solicitor and his mother a doctor in general practice. He has two younger sisters. His parents have recently separated and are intending to get

4 *Helping and Supporting Students*

divorced as soon as possible. Adrian is anxious about his course. He now recognizes that he chose it more because he was determined to strike out on his own than because he knew or cared much about business. An able student, he is not finding it as interesting or as intellectually challenging as the work he did for his A-levels at school. He wonders whether he is on the right course. However, he is uncertain about how he would negotiate any change in the financing of his course. With two professional parents each with a substantial income, he is not entitled to any grant from his local education authority. He is, therefore, entirely dependent upon his father and/or mother for financial support. Neither of his parents was keen that he should study business and each of them would have preferred him to go in for something more like their own professional career. He fears that to reopen discussion about his future at this point will be divisive; he is also very much afraid that either or both his parents could withdraw financial support if he were to change course. Although he has got on reasonably well with his fellow students, he has found them disappointingly dull, mostly having interests very different from his own. He has not yet acquired any close friends with whom he can discuss his family situation. Somewhat to his surprise, he finds himself longing to talk to his two sisters. He feels very responsible for them, now that the family is breaking up, and is conscious that they are still involved in the tensions between their parents whereas he is now out of it. His immediate concern is how and where to spend the Christmas vacation.

Barry, 26, is studying Construction Studies after completing an Access course. He worked on a building site for a number of years, and is a skilled bricklayer and plasterer. He would like to get a qualification in surveying. His hobby is football which he follows with great interest, regularly supporting his local club. Partly due to the Access course which introduced him to wider social issues to do with housing policy, he is beginning to become more politically active. He lives with his girlfriend who works as a state-enrolled nurse. Both of them are members of the campaign for nuclear disarmament through which they come into contact with a wide circle of friends. They have little money and Barry gets no back-up from his family who cannot understand why he wants to go to college. Barry feels that the other members of the course, who are mostly straight from school, know very little about the realities of the building trade or about life. By contrast, he feels he has a great deal of relevant experience and he is surprised to find how little this is appreciated on the course. Barry has real difficulty in judging how well he is getting on, since he has little idea of the standard required. Naturally, he is anxious to do well, but he has no tradition of higher education in his family to fall back on. His girlfriend has told him she thinks she may be pregnant and this has thrown him into a panic. At present he receives a grant which is barely adequate, so his girlfriend supports him financially when necessary, but their joint finances are precarious and depend crucially on his girlfriend's modest income as a nurse. He feels that his long-awaited chance of higher

education could now be jeopardized. His girlfriend, on the contrary, wants to have a baby and thinks he is overestimating the difficulties.

Christine is 38. She left school aged 18 with one A-level pass and has worked for many years as a secretary. Married with teenage children, she is now studying English Literature. Her husband has strongly encouraged and supported her to embark on a degree. She eventually enrolled on an Open University Foundation course which led to her acceptance onto a full-time course at her local university. She appears a confident and capable woman who has brought up a family, held down a job and still looks after her elderly parents. Yet her domestic problems are beginning to mount up to a point where she is having difficulty in meeting course deadlines. The problems now include: her son is truanting from school; her husband's work has suddenly become insecure; her elderly mother has had a fall; and her teenage daughter has started going out with a boyfriend whom she and her husband regard as unsuitable. Christine is reluctant to ask for extra time to complete course-work, and repeatedly insists that she does not want favoured treatment.

Denise is 20 and is studying Electronic Engineering. She is well-qualified in comparison with the rest of the group, where she is one of only three women among 32 men. Her schooling was in a single-sex Roman Catholic school where she was encouraged to take up science subjects and was very well taught by a series of excellent women teachers. She is appalled both by what she sees as the loutish behaviour of the young men on her course and by the quality of the teaching which seems to her very casual. Her lecturers are all men and she is particularly wary of approaching them outside the classroom. She now feels, having been somewhat spoon-fed at school, that she is very much on her own. Throughout her first term she travelled home most weekends to see her boyfriend, despite the cost of doing so and the effect it had on her work. It is now January and it has become clear to her during the Christmas vacation that her boyfriend didn't really want her to come home so frequently, and also her parents are urging her to make new friends and develop more social life at university. Her personal tutor has now discussed her work with her and encouraged her to think of herself as a potential high-flier. Far from being pleased, she feels this simply puts more pressure on her to do well. She is also feeling very insecure about her relationship with her boyfriend. She feels that perhaps her parents are right and that she should have mixed more with the other students, but it seems too late now to start relating differently within the student group. She wonders whether to change course. Her personal tutor is totally mystified as to why she would want to do that, and says so.

These four students may serve as a focus for the rest of this chapter. They are not meant to be fully representative (for one thing, all four students are

studying full-time, for another, they are all white), but their stories are typical of student life as it is actually experienced. Together they provide a close-up view of some common student problems and suggest some issues which need to be explored.

Unravelling problems

My first observation is that problems are rarely simple or straightforward; several problems may be bound up together. Adrian's decisions about his future are locked into his family situation and questions of financial support; Barry may feel obliged to leave his course and get a job because of his view of how an adequate husband and father should behave; Denise needs to sort out the social side of her life before she will be able to settle down to work properly. Clearly, human problems do not lend themselves to neat classification, and anyone who sets out to help and support other people in coping with their problems (which is not the same as solving their problems for them) is likely to be drawn into dealing with the whole person and their situation seen as a whole.

Thus, problems will often have to be unravelled before they can be dealt with. The problem initially identified may turn out to be, on further investigation, not the central problem at all. Denise, for instance, suggests to her personal tutor that perhaps she should leave the course. This might, indeed, be a possible way forward for her, but from the evidence available it does not seem to be the best starting-point for a discussion of her problem, which is much more to do with her own commitment and maturity. By contrast, one might imagine that Adrian, perhaps reluctant to reveal too much of his family's upheaval, might mention to his tutor that he had not yet decided where to spend Christmas. It would require a good deal of sensitive questioning to discover the facts of the situation and what he felt about it. It might then be appropriate to explore with him some of the options open to him, and to provide the kind of support that would enable him to reconsider his future plans without being unduly influenced by either of his parents or by his adviser.

It is clear that problems are not just hard to solve; they are hard to identify. Not only is there a real danger of jumping to conclusions too soon, but possibly there will be no neat 'solution' to be had. It should be noted that none of these cases is susceptible to 'a quick fix', but requires instead the provision of steady and continuous support. Adrian needs to reconsider the direction he is taking, but this will take time. His situation is complicated and he needs an opportunity to sort out where he is emotionally as well as making career decisions. Barry is in danger of being panicked into a decision he may later regret; whatever he decides will require some thoughtful adjustment on his part. Christine is hoping to find a way of being a student that will enable her to continue to cope with the ups and downs of family life, and it remains to be seen whether this is reasonable or not. It would be relatively

easy to 'solve' her problems at a stroke by encouraging her to fall behind with her work or even to withdraw temporarily from the course, but that would probably not be helpful to her, nor is it what she is asking for. Denise needs to be encouraged if possible to work through her problems rather than to run away from them, always supposing that she is serious about leaving the course. It is quite likely, however, that this suggestion is little more than a cry for help, intended to indicate to her personal tutor just how awkward she feels her position to be.

This may partly explain why the provision of help is not always experienced as helpful. As the case of Denise shows, a tutor's well-intentioned concern may actually make the problem worse if the complexity of the problem is not recognized. Her tutor expresses surprise at her suggestion that she should leave the course when she has made such a promising start. However, by reacting in this way the tutor has effectively raised the stakes as far as Denise is concerned. The last thing she wants to hear is that her tutors have great hopes for her. Far from relieving her anxiety, the tutor may have contributed to it by putting her under further pressure. Something similar could arise in the case of Christine. Her tutor will have to make a judgement as to whether it is actually going to help her if she is allowed extra time to complete her work. Will it perhaps add to the pressure she is under? It is certainly possible that, from Christine's point of view, it may seem like that.

Of course, what is a problem for one student may not be a problem for another. Christine takes major difficulties in her stride while Denise seems to be getting 'stuck' over what appears to be something of a side issue. Barry and Denise would probably regard Adrian as extremely fortunate and privileged, and might have difficulty in understanding his scruples about precisely where his financial support was coming from. People differ both in their perception of problems as well as in their ability to cope with them.

People do not always understand their own motives either. The reason why Denise visited her boyfriend so frequently might not have been that the relationship was a close one, but only that she wished it was. She could have been treating it unconsciously as a kind of anchor offering security at a time when she was facing major change in other areas of her life. Or perhaps it was rather that, finding herself in what seemed to her a very vulnerable position in a class consisting almost entirely of male students, she had a practical need to be able to refer to a settled and established relationship as a way of signalling her non-availability. Yet she may have done this quite unconsciously. Again, Adrian may not realize that his opinion of the academic content of his course is likely to be coloured by the fact that he feels a fish out of water in the student group. Barry, too, may be unwittingly motivated by a feeling that he should not be living parasitically on his girlfriend's earnings, but should take full parental responsibility.

In all these cases, a conversation with someone not emotionally involved would probably help them see their problems more objectively, and clarify their own feelings and motivations. Clearly, our concern has to be with the unravelling of problems, not simply with their solution. Indeed, as we shall

see in Chapter 2, we may wish to resist the idea that our concern is primarily with 'problems' as such.

Problems in the early stages

My second observation is that students appear to be especially vulnerable at the start of their courses. Most experienced counsellors and student advisers agree that it is in the first year that students need most support. Some would say that the first few days are crucial. Why is this?

There is plenty of evidence (e.g. of military units) that unpleasant conditions can be tolerated given that people can see some point to it, know there's an end to it, and have a sense of 'all being in it together'. A course of higher education is often experienced as demanding, but it is voluntarily undertaken and it does not last for ever. Even very unhappy students sometimes manage to persist once the end comes into view. However, in the initial stages the end is often not clearly seen, the value only dimly grasped, and there may be very little sense of being involved in a joint undertaking. It takes time to establish one's own networks of support, and many new students are literally (or feel themselves to be effectively) cut off from previous sources of help. Also, it is of the nature of higher education that its benefits are often better appreciated with hindsight. Doubts about its worth, therefore, can very easily be entertained before one has got very far.

Many students have to cope with sharp discontinuities of teaching methods and styles. For Denise this discontinuity was experienced as a severe handicap; after years of clear guidance she felt she was left to fend for herself. Adrian too had previous experiences which were a less than ideal preparation for the higher education he embarked upon, for in his case he had been encouraged to develop lines of enquiry of his own in a way which could not be accommodated in his Business Studies course, with the result that he experienced it as a strait-jacket. Problems of this sort could become more common in future as school-leavers, whose experience of schooling may latterly have been of small-group teaching, encounter a higher education system operating with relatively high staff-student ratios and making more use of open learning systems. Increasing numbers of students from abroad, too, may find it necessary not only to adjust to British weather and food, but to acclimatize themselves to a different style of teaching and to different ideas of how learners should behave.

Like any other social role, being a student is to some extent a matter of 'knowing the ropes', and today large numbers of students, like Barry, enter higher education with no very clear idea of what to expect or what will be expected of them. It takes time to settle into a new environment, find one's feet and establish a web of relationships within which support and help can be both given and received. The difficulties of coping with change loom large in most students' experience. Chapter 3 will explore this issue further and will suggest some alternative ways of conceptualizing it.

Typical student problems

My third initial observation is that the difficulties students face no longer seem to fit into the category of 'student problems'. There are certain kinds of problem, such as 'examination stress' or 'homesickness', that have traditionally been seen as part of student life. Until quite recently it was reasonable to assume that student advisers were largely concerned with matters of this sort (see Bramley 1977). Today, however, students' problems are significantly different. This is partly because the student body now includes a large proportion of mature students. Indeed, on many courses students aged 18 or 19 may well find themselves to be a minority group. This means both that their problems are likely to be rather different and that they may need a rather different kind of support from that provided a generation ago. Yet it is not just older students who have different kinds of problems. The nature of student life has been significantly altered, not least by the changed pattern of recruitment, so that the experience of all students has a different character.

This can be illustrated by reference to the case of Adrian and Denise, the two younger students. Clearly, there are problems of transition into higher education which, even for students who come straight from school, are not exactly cases of 'homesickness' as traditionally conceived (i.e. missing your home, your parents, your mother's cooking, your dog), but involve a more complex set of possibly conflicting emotions. There might be, in Adrian's case, some relief at being away from home, mixed with feelings of guilt that, had he stayed at home, he might have been able to hold his parents together, and a strong urge to cling fiercely to such family relationships as remain intact. Many students, like Denise, travel home frequently not to see their parents, but on account of someone else with whom they have an intense emotional and possibly sexual relationship. Thus, the notion of 'homesickness' has to be radically redefined.

Older students may bring with them into higher education a range of problems not previously associated with student life. These include parental responsibilities, and problems with childcare and travel arrangements. Their relationship problems, too, may be of quite a different order. For instance, whereas in Adrian's case he had to cope with the upset of his parents splitting up, some mature students try to continue with a course of study while experiencing the breakdown of their own marriages.

This shift in student problems is evident in other ways. Financial worries now loom much larger than they did for many students, partly because of the decline in the value of the grant, but partly also because students cannot help being aware of inequalities between one student and another. As Adrian's case illustrates, it is not always simply a matter of having enough money, but of who provides it and on what terms. Parents and partners, as well as industrial sponsors, can offer financial support 'with strings attached', thereby creating an uneasy or uncomfortable dependency. Funding policies which in practice require greater parental contributions not only put equal

opportunities at risk, but prolong students' dependence on their families and extend their indebtedness to them.

Another issue arises from greater awareness of gender inequality. As one of three female students enrolled on an almost entirely male course, Denise faces a problem quite different from that of a few years ago when women were effectively excluded. Many young women find they have exchanged the frustration of being academically thwarted for the spotlight of being pioneers in a man's world. In their experience it may be only marginally preferable.

Anxiety about academic potential, too, is much more of an issue than it was. A student like Barry enters higher education with very little idea of where he stands in relation to the rest of the group; he may be unnecessarily over-anxious, or he may be unwarrantably cocksure. Nor is it just lack of ability that causes problems. Part of Adrian's problem may be that he perceives himself, rightly or wrongly, to be capable of following a course that is more academically demanding than the one for which he has enrolled. What seems to be happening is that whereas once it was largely a matter of avoiding distractions and doing enough work, today many students genuinely wonder whether they have the ability to meet the required standards. This may be partly due to the general expansion of higher education, reaching sections of the population who have no tradition of educational success and, more specifically, to the deliberate recruitment of less well-prepared students. However, it is also due to a more highly-pressured social environment which encourages the single-minded pursuit of examination success. The student who dabbles in a wide range of activities, whether sport, amateur dramatics or producing a student newspaper, is no longer widely admired. Today, most students work quite hard and what distinguishes the most successful is not so much their motivation, but their ability. They are, therefore, susceptible to fears that their performance will turn out to be disappointing, especially if told, like Denise, that their early work is promising.

So it is not just that students in general present a different profile of problems from those of a generation ago; in many contexts the whole experience of student life has altered, become less insulated, in a way that affects every student. Wider access is only one expression of this changed approach characterized by greater openness. It follows that students' problems are less of a special category and much more like everyone else's problems. Higher education is much less of an enclosed world in that students' lives tend to be intertwined with those of other people external to the academic institution. Barry, Christine and, in a different way, Adrian, all have domestic or family responsibilities that actually or potentially impinge on their work as students, while Denise is failing to do her best work because of an unsatisfactory personal relationship.

Of course, it has always been the case that there was more to students' lives than being a student. However, there have been some far-reaching changes to the higher education experience, both in the way that parents are excluded from it and in the other commitments that students bring to it. Students' problems are not just student-type problems, but reflect quite

accurately the sort of problems which are faced by almost anyone. In Chapter 4 we shall look more closely at the broad social changes which have made such a difference to the student experience.

This chapter has started from the assumption that student support is all about dealing with and responding to students' *problems*. However, to focus on problems may not be the most appropriate way to think about the help these students need. Given the complex nature of quite commonplace problems, the language of 'finding a solution' is liable to mislead us by providing the wrong kind of frame. The aim in providing support is not simply to enable students to survive, but to ensure that they derive maximum benefit from their course and, indeed, from their whole experience of student life. Adrian, Barry, Christine and Denise all need a clearer sense of who they are, what they want, where they are going and why – benefits which the very experience of higher education is often supposed to provide. Already, then, it is possible to see how the task of helping and supporting students might be conceived as much more central to the higher education experience. This will be a recurring theme throughout this book.

We began straightforwardly by looking at students' problems. It is now possible to see that this may have been something of a false start. All students, whether they appear to have problems or not, need help and support through their student careers, and this help needs to be seen not simply as enabling them to surmount obstacles, but more positively, as encouraging in them the development of their full potential. Our next step, then, will be to challenge the emphasis on problems by introducing a broader, developmental perspective.

2

The Experience of Development

Because of the emphasis on dealing with students' problems, student support tends to be seen as a back-up service, in principle available to all but in practice needed only by those who are overwhelmed by difficulties. To suggest that student support has a wider role than that of an ambulance service, and indeed that it should be integral to the higher education experience, is to offer a sharp challenge to this approach. The objective, it is argued, is to contribute positively to the ongoing development of all students whether they have problems or not. The aim of this chapter is to explore this developmental perspective and to consider what it might mean to encourage and promote students' development.

In what way, then, do students develop and how can this process be fostered? This question highlights two key points. First, while we may say that it is part of higher education's task to bring about the academic and personal development of students, we have to acknowledge that growth towards maturity occurs spontaneously and takes place independently of higher education. Development figures in any account of the student experience, both as a process which goes on concurrently and as an essential element within higher education itself. However, second, we have to recognize, now that there are so many more mature students and now that, in any case, 18 not 21 has been declared to be the age of majority as far as the law is concerned, that the developmental process is often considered to be nearing completion, if not actually completed, at the point when students enter higher education. So long as mature students were a tiny minority it was possible to think of students as typically going through late adolescence, i.e. in the process of completing the final stage of their journey to adulthood. This is clearly no longer an appropriate way of thinking about student life. Institutions of higher education do not teach students who are on their way towards adulthood; they teach people who are already adult.

However, while physical maturity and legal adulthood may be attained by the age of 18, a person's psychological development continues into adult life. Human development may be seen as extending throughout the life course, as a lifelong process. Furthermore, in so far as educational processes help towards improved self-understanding, they clearly foster psychological development.

It is true that the extension of educational opportunity to allow more and more young people to remain longer in the educational system has sometimes seemed to be an extension of the period of adolescence, delaying entry to the adult world of work. Yet higher education institutions do not have to be seen as places where young people are kept in tutelage; they might be better described as agencies offering people of any age a particular kind of service, namely the possibility of self-development consciously pursued and deliberately fostered. Thus, it is not just for 18-year-olds that the experience of being a student is intertwined with, and perhaps even indistinguishable from, the experience of being a developing person. All students, whatever their chronological age and degree of maturity, can experience higher education as a process of personal development.

To suggest, then, that student support is not primarily a matter of dealing with students' difficulties, but of providing on-going support to enable them to develop through their courses is to do more than to redefine student support; it is to raise questions about those developmental processes which precede, coexist with, and are inseparable from the educational process. How are we to understand this development? How can students be supported as they go through this developmental process? And how, if at all, is it possible to help the process along?

Within the student's experience it is possible to distinguish three dimensions along which change may be taking place: development as a person; development as a student; and development in relation to some specific career. We need to discuss each of these in turn before considering how they may be interrelated.

Development as a person

First, then, what sort of personal and psychological development might we expect to see typically taking place in students? Notwithstanding the recruitment of many more older entrants, students are still mostly young, often very young adults. Are there developmental processes which they would be going through in any case, whether they were students or not? Does the concept of development through the life course mean that the experiences of older, more mature students are also to be understood developmentally?

There is a sense in which it is relatively easy to answer these questions. Any standard textbook will give a description of adult development which accords with commonsense observations such as, for example, that someone young and relatively inexperienced in life is likely to flounder in circumstances which an older person would probably take in their stride. Yet there is a major difficulty with this approach; to describe personal development as a lifelong process is to redefine what one is talking about.

As is well-known, developmental processes were first studied in children. Founded on the work of paediatricians, the discipline of child development was initially concerned with tracing the progress of physical growth. It seemed obvious that in childhood some major developments such as the

ability to walk or talk might have an immediate and dramatic impact on other aspects of development (social, cognitive, emotional, etc.) and that all aspects of the developing child (even, less plausibly, moral and linguistic development) were to be understood as parallel and interlocking developmental processes.

Of course, the further one moves from purely physical development the harder it is to find a common pattern. Nonetheless, developmental psychologists have tried to identify stages of development from infancy to adolescence, so as to provide a comprehensive psychological account of how younger members of society *gradually* (step by step) find their way towards adulthood. Young people in society have been portrayed as having to learn how to relate to others, how to form relationships, so that they may then proceed through courtship to marriage and parenthood. Likewise they have been portrayed as needing to acquire knowledge and skills which they then practise, at first clumsily, later more proficiently, so that eventually they are able to make a smooth progression into adult working life.

However, such an account of adolescence, relying on a simple extension of developmental processes, is bound to be inadequate. The simple idea that physical development triggers other kinds of development cannot be sustained beyond childhood, even supposing it is valid there. Once past childhood, there are very few physical changes which are universally shared. Physical development, which for certain kinds of strength and stamina reaches its peak around age 19 or 20 or even earlier, can hardly serve as a model for all aspects of personal development. In any case, how plausible is it to suggest that adult life be conceived as a series of stages through which the individual passes? What is lacking in this kind of account is adequate recognition of the social dimension of personal experience.

In order to appreciate this, let us consider a down-to-earth example: a student who becomes unexpectedly and unintentionally pregnant. It does not take much imagination to see that the psychological effects depend to a large extent on the surrounding circumstances. What is good news for one may be disastrous for another. The person may experience it as being trapped or as being released, as a disgrace or as an honour. For one student it may provide a welcome way out of a course of study which is proving too demanding. For another it may threaten carefully-laid and long-cherished career plans. It may be seen as a kind of rite of passage to unequivocal adult status, where this has previously only grudgingly been granted. It may forge close links with one's parents, or it may finally foreclose the possibility of ever speaking to them again. It follows that those who offer students help and support need not only a wide repertoire of responses, but the sensitivity to recognize what is actually being experienced in each case.

That example may help us to see that, for our purposes, a more helpful kind of developmental theory will be that which focuses on common elements of human experience: the kinds of things that occur at some time in nearly everyone's life and which are almost bound to have some effect upon their self-understanding. The interesting questions then become the way in which

these experiences may combine, coincide or overlap in an individual's personal biography.

It is clearly necessary to reject both the idea that growing up is a once-and-for-all process which for our students will inevitably lie in the past, and the idea of adult development as a steady or uniform process. There are indeed processes of growth, but they are not so much processes of growing up or even growing older. They are better thought of as growing *through* all one's life experiences. Just as there will be various levels and types of maturity evident among our students, not always related to chronological age, so the processes of growing in and towards maturity will be taking place through and alongside their higher education experience.

Put like that, it is clear that the experience of higher education, while not one that is universally shared, is nonetheless one with common features and which will exert a strong formative influence on the lives of most students. That is not to say that it will always have the same effect, of course. It belongs in the same class as, say, 'parenthood' or 'unemployment', in that while people experience these things differently and some people may miss them altogether, for those who do experience them it is likely that they will impact upon their lives quite powerfully and may indeed, by the pressures they exert and by the responses they evoke, set up patterns which shape the subsequent course of their lives.

Once this is clearly recognized it becomes easier to see how students and others undergoing such potentially formative experiences can be encouraged to use them creatively and grow through them. For experiences do not come with their meaning written on their face; their meaning has to be constructed, and they have the potential to develop or to diminish the person. The task, therefore, is to help students to construct positive meanings out of the new materials available, which include the student's own past as well as current experiences.

It is worth noticing how different this is from the traditional view of adolescent development as a kind of apprenticeship to adulthood with the early stages seen as a kind of rehearsal or preparation for the later stages. Once it is recognized that *the life-cycle itself* is subject to change, it is no longer possible to use the model of growth towards maturity in this simple way. People grow apart as well as grow closer. Careers no longer have the smooth trajectory or the defined destination that were once presumed. As the course and direction of an adult life becomes harder to predict with any confidence the idea of somehow being prepared for it no longer fits. Increasingly, student life needs to be seen not as a preparation for what is to come afterwards, but for what it is in itself. It is not an introduction to adult life, it is part of adult life.

Development as a student

We now need to ask whether there are particular kinds of development that may be seen specifically among students. Can we identify ways in which

there is development in 'studenthood' as well as development towards 'adulthood' (see, for example, Perry, 1970; Chickering, 1972; Astin, 1984)?

Clearly, there are likely to be some common patterns of development for students who move through a sequence of shared experiences. For instance, we might expect some cyclic process to be visible as students go through the three years of full-time study on a single subject honours degree course, year 1 being characterized by the problems of settling in, finding one's feet, getting one's bearings, and year 3 by the job-search, interviews, the need to distance oneself somewhat from student life, and the stresses of final examinations. What, then, of year 2? Often it constitutes something of a trough between the year of arriving and year of leaving. In the traditional folk-lore of student advisers, it has often been thought of as the year in which there is typically a good deal of agonizing about whether one is following the right course, studying the most appropriate subject, making the right friends, making best use of one's higher education, working hard enough, etc. In the USA the term 'sophomore slump' (Lemons and Richmond, 1987) has been used for this phenomenon, which is considered common enough and serious enough to require some theoretical explanation.

There are, certainly, a number of problems which may surface around mid-point in a full-time course, such as: Why am I studying this? Is it *really* what I want to do? It is perfectly understandable if, as the work gets harder and progress becomes more of a struggle, some students voice their concern at how hard it is getting and how long it is taking. There may also be motivational problems in the second year of a three-year course. Once into the second year of a traditional straight-through course, one's options appear considerably narrowed. The novelty of student life has worn off, and the anxiety of the final year has not yet loomed large. Yet if the work load continues to feel heavy it is sometimes the student with broad abilities and lively interests who is most aware of the sacrifices having to be made, and who wonders whether it is worth it.

That said, it is obvious that it is more complicated than this. Courses have their own ups and downs (Olesen and Whittaker, 1968) which correspond to a wide range of factors: the pattern of terms and vacations; the timing of assessments; and perhaps the length of work-based placements where they are included.¹ Nonetheless can student development be positively facilitated and enhanced? Many would argue that it can, and that there are common qualities and skills which can be identified and deliberately fostered in students.² There are interesting questions as to precisely how this occurs, but undoubtedly teaching strategies involving personal portfolios and learning records can have the effect of raising students' awareness of their own learning processes, which in turn may enhance their performance.

It now appears that what the employers of graduates want and what adults in our society need are much the same. Thus, educational programmes which successfully develop key personal skills and qualities in students may serve three purposes at once: they may help students towards a more mature and fulfilling adult life; help them towards a more skilful and sophisticated

student learning experience in higher education; and enhance their prospects in the job market. Such skills and qualities are conceived as general and transferable. However, there are also many more specific skills and qualities developed within particular courses, especially where the student's studies are 'applied' and have a clear vocational relevance. So our next question is: Can vocational or professional learning be conceived developmentally?

Development in relation to specific occupations

Alongside a student's personal growth to maturity and his or her development through the student career we may look for a third set of processes by which the student is transformed into the member of a particular occupational group or profession. Does the following of a particular course, or the pursuit of a particular career or profession offer a distinctive kind of development? Vocational courses, and those which carry some professional qualification or recognition, clearly have built into them, explicitly or implicitly, elements of occupational socialization. Even courses which are strictly speaking non-vocational may, nonetheless, convey to students a sense of being drawn into the profession of, say, historian or artist, of being in some way initiated into a way of looking at the world. So at one and the same time a young person may be learning how to be a student, discovering how to be a more adult person and beginning to acquire an academic or professional identity.

It seems likely that professional or vocational development may be experienced not as a steady progression, but as a series of steps, each prompted by some significant event. Just as it is sometimes suggested that events such as becoming a parent or one's children leaving home act as triggers for developmental stages through the life course, so it is possible that specific events within a college course might mark a significant movement towards the desired professional role. It is possible, for instance, that for a medical student the first injection given, or the first patient who died, might be experienced as a 'significant event' in this sense, i.e. a step on the road to becoming a fully-fledged practitioner.

Three rather different patterns of occupational socialization might be distinguished (Earwaker, 1986) simply on the basis of how different courses are structured. Some courses of professional training are orientated towards the profession right from the start. Students enrolled on such courses might reasonably expect that they would be immediately plunged into professional concerns and that all their theoretical studies would be made relevant to professional practice. In some cases students might know that their acceptance on the course virtually guaranteed them a job on graduation. The transition from trainee to practitioner would, therefore, normally be very smooth indeed. One might call that pattern 'instant professionalization'. Almost from the first, students on such a course can count themselves as new members of the professional group.

At the other extreme is the type of training pattern which defers direct contact with the professionals until certain purely academic requirements have been met. The first part of the course consists of 'foundation' studies, and successful completion of this first stage is a pre-requisite for admission to the second stage of explicit training. Yet this training is still broad and generic, is issue-based rather than problem-based, and is, perhaps, undertaken alongside students preparing for a variety of professional roles. Much of it is carried out in college rather than on the job. Placements cannot allow the job to be carried out unsupervised, so they consist of more observation than practice. Typically, students following courses such as these have major adjustments to make on entry to their first job. They do not feel they really belong in the profession until some time after graduation and beginning work. One might call this pattern 'deferred professionalization'.

In between these two extremes is another pattern which can be observed, in which students begin as novices who initially have no right to be taken seriously as members of the profession, but are progressively led through a series of practical experiences and theoretical studies so that they gradually come to see themselves, and to be accepted as, members of the professional group. This acceptance more or less coincides with graduation, since the course requirements embody the professional requirements. Throughout, there is the sense of the process being a gradual and incremental one, and that it would be as wrong to accelerate the process by treating students as fellow-professionals too early as it would be to withhold recognition from final year students as they approach graduation.

In so far as these models correspond to the felt experience of students preparing for specific professional roles, they suggest ways in which it would be appropriate to offer help and support in each case. There is no implication that any one pattern is better than the others; it suits some students to defer commitment, whereas others are keen to identify with the profession as soon as possible. Yet it is easy to see how students might experience a mismatch between the pace of professional development presupposed by their course and their own sense of growing into the professional role. Yet both frustration and trepidation might be turned to positive effect with appropriate help and support.

Some experiments (Earwaker, 1987) in which students were invited to plot the shape of their professional development on a graph, while broadly validating the three-fold distinction suggested above, yielded some surprisingly diverse patterns. Some saw their development step-wise, others as a straight line moving steadily upwards, but many drew shapes which indicated one or more major crises, often indicated by a downward dip followed by an upward surge, as if to suggest that crises can also be learning experiences and that surmounting problems can lead to growth. This strongly suggests that the notion of development is inherently problematic. Far from implying steady progress or the systematic build-up of expertise or confidence in successive stages, the most significant advances are often experienced as great leaps forward following a period of sterility or difficulty, rapid recovery from a crisis, or

the sudden removal of a blockage. Patterns of development there may be; but individuals often make progress by fits and starts, sometimes with the most spectacular breakthroughs consequent upon the most testing challenges.

Complex pathways of development

Three sets of developmental processes have been distinguished. It is likely that the experience of many students will include development along all three of these dimensions, in that they are simultaneously becoming adults, becoming students and becoming whatever it is that their course is preparing them for.

First, there is the general developmental process of growing up and growing older which affects everyone in some way or other, together with whatever processes are specific to their own particular age-group. These are processes that would be going on in any case, whether they were students or not. Second, there is the student career. Third, there is the process by which the student is introduced to, learns the routines of, acquires the standards of and is socialized into the norms of a particular profession. We are used to thinking of this as a social process of learning a new role, which indeed it is. So is becoming a student. However, in both cases the processes can be construed as developmental, analogous to the process by which one grows towards and through adulthood.

These three sets of processes overlap with each other. More than that, they are actually interrelated; they have mutual influence on each other. For instance, a male student who immerses himself in his work may be trying to get free from what he experiences as undue parental influence in the only way he knows, and hopes to do so by establishing himself in due course as a respected professional person. So his professional development offers a route to adult status. Similarly, a female student who experiences severe examination stress may actually have quite low aspirations for herself, but feel that her parents' expectations are impossibly high and tied to career aspirations which she does not share. Her own personal development is, therefore, tangled up with her status within the family and a projected career path to which she feels uncommitted. Both these examples show clearly the way in which personal development has to be negotiated in the face of conflicting pressures, both positive and negative, from a variety of sources. Students are often confused about their own identity, feeling under pressure to conform to expectations from their teachers, their family and their peers, and wanting to reconcile these different sets of expectations with their own sense of themselves as developing persons.

It should now be clear that the notion of student development is a useful correction to the idea that student support is simply a matter of helping people cope with problems. Equally, however, its weaknesses and limitations are now rather apparent. To extrapolate developmental processes into adulthood while continuing to think of them as individual growth is not, after all, such a radical step. What transforms the understanding of development is the

recognition that these processes are prompted by and shaped in interaction with external influences.

The point being made here is not that there is a mismatch between models derived from infant development and the reality of adult development, but that development, at every point, has to be seen as an interactive process. Even development in babyhood is now seen as inherently social (Kaye, 1984). Thus, the kinds of processes outlined in this chapter are not very adequately described as processes of 'development' if that term is taken to suggest elements of the personality gradually unfolding from within. Development beyond childhood is commonly brought about by a certain quality of interpersonal engagement, such as might be found in a teaching-learning encounter, rather than by simply growing up or growing older. Much of the personal development of students in higher education will occur as a result of external influence, often in response to some sort of challenge or pressure. Indeed, the problems which students face may be seen positively, not just as pressures to be withstood, but as circumstances to be coped with, ordeals to grow through or challenges to be responded to. Student development, like any other developmental process, occurs in interaction with the physical and social environment.

This exposes a fundamental weakness of this theoretical framework. To become an adult, or for that matter to become a student or an accountant, is not simply a process of individual development. It is a social process by which one is progressively granted, by others, a certain social status. It is governed not simply by one's own rate of developmental progress, but by other people's assessments of it and, more subtly still, by one's own internalization of those assessments. To some extent it may depend upon opportunities being available and circumstances being favourable. For instance, broad social changes giving wider access to higher education may have in some ways accelerated and in other ways slowed the process by which one becomes adult in our society.

This chapter will have succeeded in its purpose if it has brought out the unsatisfactoriness of a purely developmental account of student life. The student experience may of course, be described as an experience of development. Higher education's task is then seen more clearly to be one of continuously optimizing this experience rather than simply removing difficulties for the student or helping the student to surmount obstacles. However, a more rounded understanding of the student experience will place it in a broader framework of social relationships and will respond to it accordingly. The student experience is not fully or adequately described in purely psychological terms as an individual experience of change or growth or development. The next chapter necessarily moves towards a broader, psycho-social perspective.

Notes

1. Olesen and Whittaker (1968) followed a group of student nurses and tried to chart their group psychology as they surmounted obstacles and endured the plateaus of their course.
2. Under the recent 'enterprise' initiatives a number of higher education institutions have launched programmes involving elements of student-centred learning designed to develop students' personal skills and qualities.

3

The Experience of Transition

Nearly every student experiences the beginning of a course of study as some sort of disruption. Even for a part-time student whose domestic and social arrangements remain more or less intact there is likely to be some sense of entering upon a new phase of life, embarking upon a new enterprise. For full-time students it may involve a sudden change of circumstances with profound effects on social life, vocational aspirations and self-understanding. While these effects are often positive they do not come without cost. The process has to be described not just as change, but exchange: a relatively comfortable, settled existence may be traded for an uncertain future, a gamble in which the risks are great and the stakes high. There is often an element of sacrifice, if not in paying substantial fees or in postponed earnings, then in time given up or status lost.

Before discussing possible difficulties involved in what is a potentially stressful experience, it must at once be admitted that transition to a different kind of life is not bound to be fraught with problems; in fact, it may often be a welcome change. It may be experienced as release rather than as a threat or a burden. Mature students especially may experience student life as, initially, one of enormous freedom from domestic responsibilities. Yet to note this is not to concede that the transition occurs completely without stress. New students face major challenges which loom so large in the individual's consciousness that everything else is suspended and the normal pressures of life temporarily fade into the background. The situation is not unlike that of new recruits in the forces; minor aches and pains tend to be forgotten as one large worry eclipses all the rest. Something similar may sometimes be experienced at the approach of examinations. So a student's entry to higher education may be experienced as a kind of release, not because the transition occurs without stress, but because of the way stress works on individuals. Many, probably most, incoming students are in a state of high arousal in which all the resources of the person are fully stretched. Entry to higher education may be accompanied by excitement and even euphoria as well as by panic and despair.

It also needs to be pointed out that the transition to student life may be much less of a change for some students. Older students who continue to

live at home may not only be better at adjusting; they may have less adjustment to make. It may be that much of their lives can continue as though nothing had happened. Of course, the more one is locked into domestic routines, family networks, neighbourhood contacts and regular leisure pursuits, the more supports one has available. The domestic responsibilities which from one point of view seem to create difficulties for many mature women students can from another point of view be seen as supports which many younger students simply do not have. Problems arise when, say, a spouse is unsympathetic or unco-operative, and family life can absorb a great deal of energy. However, young students living away from home for the first time often have to begin their social life all over again. They start with nothing, knowing nobody. In this respect mature students living at home have a huge advantage; at worst, their support systems have not been totally disrupted, and at best they may remain firmly intact. Moreover, belonging to a group, whether of family, neighbourhood or community, not only gives direct support by providing companionship or a listening ear when required, but it helps indirectly as well. The circle of friends which most people establish around them over time helps to create a continuing sense of identity which can sustain them through minor difficulties. The value of this should not be underestimated.

In anyone's life course it is possible to identify key events or turning-points. In some lives these may be changes of a quite drastic and dramatic sort, such as a sudden religious conversion, or 'coming out' as gay. We might identify going to college as another event of this sort, an experience so powerful and transforming that nothing could ever be the same again.

Yet entry to higher education may be experienced in very different ways. It may offer risks or it may provide security; it may involve financial sacrifices or it may constitute a prudent investment; it may in some cases offer a fast route to success, so justifying the risks taken and the sacrifices made, yet in other cases it appears, in career terms, to be leading nowhere, justifying itself, if at all, in intrinsic satisfactions and rewarding experiences. Becoming a student may be either a step up or a step down the social ladder. What determines its significance will be not so much the student's chronological age as his or her personal circumstances.

Metaphors of change

So how do people cope with change as they go through life? In what ways are people able to sustain themselves through a difficult transition? It is helpful to consider some of the most common metaphors for change. Some have already been mentioned, such as adjustment and transition. One could add a long list of such terms, which would include socialization, learning, being accepted, getting used to it, finding ways of coping, devising appropriate strategies, getting 'slotted in', fitting in, square pegs in round holes and so on. There are clearly many different ways of conceiving the process, some of which may be better than others.

Unfortunately, many of the words and phrases commonly used to describe a student's initial experience of higher education commit us prematurely to some quite specific frame of reference. To speak of 'homesickness', for instance, is at once to imply a medical model in which the student is a patient suffering from a quasi-clinical condition. 'Transition' is a rather imprecise term, but it may, for this reason, be preferred to metaphors which in some way restrict our understanding of the processes of change. It may be used to refer to a wide range of events, processes and experiences. It allows us to consider together, for example, both the student whose initial experience of higher education is of entering a world of undreamed-of cultural richness and the student for whom it means above all focusing attention on quite a narrow area of experience; both the student who has come away to college after years of being looked after at home with the rest of the family and the student who in order to return to study has had to surrender an independent and perhaps relatively prosperous lifestyle. Transitions may be of many sorts and by using this umbrella word it may be possible to keep this broad frame of reference.

Why is transition experienced as a problem in human life? It appears that any radical discontinuity can pose a threat to our sense of who we are. It is as if the thread running through our lives has been, or is just about to be broken. Thus, in moving into new circumstances we are not just having to recover from the shock of the new, but we may actually have to repair damage to the self, to reconstruct our sense of who we are when our previous self is apparently no longer appropriate or viable. In considering the problems associated with transition, therefore, we are forced to consider what provides the continuity. Is it a relatively straightforward matter of regularity of behaviour which is now disrupted and has yet to settle into a new pattern? Or is it an altogether more profound continuity related to a sense of personal identity which formerly rendered life meaningful and which has now been lost? The process may, indeed, be conceived as a matter of surface behaviour only, or in terms of underlying motives and cognitive schemes. However, consistency in an individual's conduct may depend more on coherence of purpose than on continuity in patterns of behaviour. The underlying question here, then, can be put like this. Is the thread running through our lives a thread of habit or a thread of meaning? (Danziger, 1971:27). Different answers to this question will lead to different accounts of why transition can be a problem, what damage it can do, and what can be done to help.

Adjustment

Personality theories have generally presupposed a model in which the individual remains constant while situations change. That is to say, life consists of a series of adjustments to new situations. The person has to accommodate him or herself to changes, but remains fundamentally intact so that

questions can be asked in the form 'What impact did this (the event) have on you (the person)?' or 'How did you (the person) manage to adjust to this (the event)?'

Peter Marris (1986) in his book *Loss and Change* claimed that every situation of change could be thought of as an experience of loss and understood on the analogy of a bereavement. This is a helpful idea in that it enables us to appreciate that any change is a shock to the system, and it is likely that the stages of recovery from the shock are likely to look similar whether the event impacting upon the personality is loss of a loved one, loss of a home, loss of a job or loss of a lifestyle. Marris claimed to find common threads running through experiences as diverse as the failure of a business, going away to college and slum-clearance in Nigeria. Clearly, people react to change – of any sort – in fairly predictable ways. Exactly how people adjust to a new situation will doubtless depend to some extent on the personality of the individual, his or her previous experiences, and perhaps crucially on the strategies that have worked successfully for that individual in the past. However, this insight relates mainly to the stages of recovery from the impact of a single shocking event, whereas the transition to student life, like most changes in life, has to be seen not just as a single event, but as an ongoing experience requiring a series of adjustments over time. Marris is surely right to draw attention to the common features of the experience of different kinds of change, but there does not seem to be any reason why we should identify the common features with the negative aspects of the experience. Change in human life means saying hello to the new as well as goodbye to the old; if loss and bereavement are discernible in almost every kind of upheaval, then so are elements of challenge and opportunities for fresh beginnings.

The question seems to be about how people adapt to change. Yet by putting the question in that form we may already be making certain assumptions about the process of change or transition. Do we have the right model? Is it a matter of seeing how fully-formed and stable personalities manage to make the necessary adjustments, or is that to rely too heavily on a perspective drawn from individual psychology?

Whereas early personality theory worked on the assumption that people behaved in a fairly consistent manner across different situations and over time, more recent research questions both these assumptions with evidence that, for example, there can be enormous personality changes following marriage. People change and are changed by each other. The kind of explanation of personal change that starts from personality theory and relies entirely on a purely psychological approach is likely to pay insufficient attention to the social dimension of experience.

A good example of this may be seen in the work of Vincent Tinto (1988) who has explored the process by which students leave college at the end of their course. Leaving higher education is, of course, another process of transition which may be understood in much the same way as entry to it, or for that matter any minor personal transitions which occur in between. Although Tinto acknowledges his debt to the Dutch anthropologist Van Gennep, and

specifically echoes Van Gennep's 'rite of passage' terminology, Tinto's frame of reference remains obstinately psychological. He offers a stage theory of student departure, according to which the student progressively withdraws commitment from one community and moves towards engagement with another. What is striking here is the persistence of the developmental stage model and its application to what is clearly a social process, explicitly acknowledged to be such. The dominance of developmental psychology in interpretations of personal experience through the lifespan has repeatedly resulted in experiences which are manifestly social processes being interpreted as stages of personal growth, and student development is no exception.

It is, of course, not too difficult to discern some sort of regular pattern in any gradual or progressive change, but that frame of reference can easily dominate our thinking to the extent that we focus simply on tracing an individual's personal pathway through the life course with an eye only for continuities and discontinuities, regularities and stages. We may not then notice that gradual separation from one community and progressive incorporation into another are, crucially, social processes. Adjustment is not just a personal matter; other people are involved. Parents have to relinquish control of their offspring if the young person's bid for independence is to succeed. The new entrant to higher education can only make the transition to 'being a student' in the fullest sense if the relevant academic and social communities are open to this possibility, and facilitate participation and belonging.

Socialization

Sociological accounts of transition focus much more on the changed circumstances and use concepts like role to suggest ways in which individuals might acquire new ways of behaving to meet new expectations. From this perspective, the questions to ask new students will not be 'How well have you managed to adjust?' or 'What stage have you reached in your settling-in process?', but rather 'How are you getting on in your new role?' or 'Are you managing to work out what is expected of you?' Entry to higher education, for instance, will not be interpreted as a personal ordeal so much as an unfamiliar game where the rules have to be learned and the skills practised in order to join in fully.

Every transition may be interpreted in this way as a social experience, and the concept of socialization throws into relief the way that in any new situation there are rules and routines to be learned and practised, and expectations to be met. This is true even of very personal and apparently private experiences like becoming ill (Robinson, 1971). The onset of illness is not a purely private matter, but is dependent upon shared frameworks of meaning that have been socially-constructed; becoming a patient is not simply a matter of possessing physical symptoms, but involves new ways of behaving according to sets of expectations that are commonly understood

and accepted. The same is true of becoming a student. There are shared ideas of what it is to be a student, of how a student will behave, even of what a student will look like, and part of the transition to student life is falling in with these role-expectations to some degree or other.

Thus, the transitions of an individual's life are not the relatively private life-events sometimes supposed, but moves in a social game. More than that, the points of transition may themselves be socially specified. However idiosyncratic the individual's life story, it is likely to fall into a familiar shape, structured around certain common markers that constitute turning-points in everyone's life. While norms of physical development, so important in infancy, are hard to establish beyond childhood, common patterns of social experience are relatively easily identified. Every society has rites of passage and growing up may be conceived as largely consisting of passing through these predetermined gateways, often at a predetermined rate. In our society as in all others there is a standard pattern; we have set ages for starting school, for leaving school and for making the transition from one form of education to another. There may be only limited scope for experiencing this differently, with the result that, with a few exceptions, each individual's personal biography assumes roughly the same shape.

This is not, of course, to underestimate the impact of these transitions. Change may still be experienced as traumatic while being, nonetheless, utterly predictable and normal. The point to emphasize here, though, is that transitions are partly given by the social structure. The individual's educational experience for instance, cannot be seen in isolation from the way the educational system is constructed, the kinds of institutions that have been established and the points of transition that have been predetermined (and which doubtless suit some individuals better than others). Blyth and Derricott (1977) in their book *The Social Significance of Middle Schools* have shown clearly and graphically how change in the age of transfer from one school to another can re-shape pupils' experience not just of schooling, but of growing up. A change in the age of transition meant that pupils who would once have been the youngest group within a school for older pupils now found themselves the oldest group within a school designed for younger pupils. Clearly, a reorganization on that scale has a major impact upon children's experience, and is a powerful influence upon their perception of what it is to be 'junior' or 'senior', and of the growing up process as a whole.

A similar point might be made about higher education in the 1990s: its structural shape goes a long way to determine the experience of its students. A binary system both reflects and reinforces a divided experience of higher education. To end it is to recognize and to re-establish higher education as inherently unified. Changes in the internal structure of institutions may have similar effects. Altering the composition of the student body by, say, increasing the numbers of mature students has an effect on the students' experience. As the number of mature students grows, they have less reason to feel exceptional or odd either within the student group or in society at large. Thus, the very meaning of the word 'student' gradually shifts, so as to put less

emphasis on youth or immaturity and more on the activity of studying which is the remaining common feature of student life. So to 'become a student' gradually loses the connotations of 'going back to school', as if this were something inappropriate for an adult to do, and begins to acquire the status of an activity undertaken with due seriousness with an eye to preparing oneself for some specific (though not necessarily life-long) role in society. The transition may still be a difficult one to make, but it is a different kind of transition. It is in this kind of way that public institutional arrangements contribute substantially to the texture and pattern of people's private lives.

This is a fairly obvious point to make in relation to legal and institutional arrangements such as the age when children start going to school and the social composition of the student body. It is less obvious, but important to note, that the freely chosen actions of individuals may, nonetheless, fit into a coherent pattern in conformity with social norms which have no legal or institutional force whatsoever. It has often been noted that while the average age at which couples get married has altered considerably in recent years, the age-difference between the partners in a first marriage has remained remarkably constant, husbands being on average about two years older than their wives. We see here evidence of social conformity in an area of life which on the face of it one would expect to be purely a matter of individual preference. As with Durkheim's pioneering work on suicide (1952), which produced definitive evidence of national differences in suicide rates, even in something which commonsense regards as a matter of free choice and where there are no formal constraints at all, we can see startling regularities which suggest the operation of powerful social norms.

Hammersley and Turner (1980) looked at the ways in which pupils adapt to secondary school, basing their ideas on Merton's (1957) analysis of types of social adaptation. They identified five characteristic modes of adaptation which they termed retreatism, ingratiating, compliance/ritualism, opportunism and rebellion. What is valuable here for our purposes is not the list as such, though clearly it is suggestive for modes of adaptation which might be characteristic of students entering higher education, but rather the point that these processes are always social processes, never simply a matter of individual adaptation. What we are looking at when we observe transition into (or for that matter out of) student life is a shared experience which goes on within a sub-culture, and which to a greater or lesser degree is helped or hindered by the group of which the student is (again to a greater or lesser degree) a part.

Thus, the obvious fact that many students feel lonely at first should not mislead us into considering their situation as belonging to them alone. The student experience is, crucially, a psycho-social experience; it is understood, experienced and coped with by groups of students who are constantly looking over their shoulders to compare with how others are getting on, and who are capable of making matters either very much better or very much worse for each other. We misconceive the process of adjustment if we treat it as a matter of individual psychology only, a process in which the tensions are

simply between continuity with our own personal past and the demands of the present. There are also tensions between the kinds of conformity required by the group and the strength of one's own personal commitments, convictions and habits. These tensions are tempered by the extent to which group approval or disapproval is felt to matter, and by the help and support that may be available to sustain or modify personal beliefs and behaviours in the face of challenge.

Transition

A more interactionist account, therefore, pays attention to these features of interpersonal and group life. In trying to understand how people go through changes in their lives it is necessary not simply to trace the continuity and/or disruption of their own life course, nor simply to examine the structural constraints which determine the pattern of most people's lives, but to appreciate how people interact with one another and with their different environments. People do not merely pass through change, but are actually affected by it. Life changes are not just things that *happen* to you, but things that *alter* you; they are, as Anselm Strauss (1962) says, 'transformations of identity'.

From this perspective the questions to ask students would not be about personal adjustment or about meeting role expectations; rather, they would be of this sort: 'what difference is it making to you?' 'how is it affecting you?' This approach appears to offer a more subtle account of transition, in that it is possible to see the process not simply as a relatively stable personality being confronted with a situation in which extensions to the repertoire of behaviour are required, nor simply as a fairly rigid set of social expectations into which an extremely pliable person has to be fitted, but as a process of negotiation in which there is a gradual matching of what the individual brings and what the new situation demands. The person gradually develops, consciously or unconsciously, a new identity, not merely to meet a set of externally imposed requirements, but to make them his or her own. At the same time as the situation impacts upon the individual, the individual impacts upon the situation so as to fill out, rather than to fit into, the new role. The self is not chameleon-like, infinitely variable, nor is the self as coherent and consistent as personality theorists have sometimes implied. Similarly, roles such as that of student are neither as rigid nor as elastic as some have suggested. The process by which square pegs fit into round holes is one of *mutual* adjustment.

Although we are inevitably caught up in change as we go through life, on the whole we experience new things by somehow fitting them within the pattern we have previously established. As human beings we feel it necessary to establish some meanings which give stability; coping with life means being able to do this. Whether we say the process is one of adjustment or socialization or identity-construction matters little so long as we are clear that it is an interactive process. It is also a cumulative process; it snowballs. Anyone undergoing a new experience seeks to make sense of what is going on in

terms that are already familiar; then, in so far as the person is successful in doing this, these meanings themselves become part of the given framework, a context within which to make sense of everything else. Once students have committed themselves to higher education, to a particular institution, to a specific course, and to a particular way of behaving as a student, then these commitments contribute to the character of their student experience and act as constraints on further choice.

H. S. Becker (1964:59) coined the term 'situational adjustment' to describe the process by which

the person, as he (sic) moves in and out of a variety of social situations, learns the requirements of continuing in each situation and of success in it. If he has a strong desire to continue, the ability to assess accurately what is required, and can deliver the required performance, *the individual turns himself into the kind of person the situation demands.* (emphasis added)

This draws attention to the way in which the adjustment may be voluntarily undertaken. Unlike some accounts of the socialization process which appear to leave very little room for the individual to negotiate the role, emphasizing only the extent to which the role is shaped and determined by structural constraints, this account suggests that to a large extent individuals, having once perceived what the existing role-expectations are, often have considerable scope to develop the role to suit themselves.

The process is a complex one in which the person is continually seeking to match perceived requirements of the role with his or her personal resources and to bring about a satisfactory fit between the two. For this reason it may be helpful to introduce Erving Goffman's (1968) term 'career' at this point, since these negotiations are never sorted out once and for all, but are continually under review. It is a matter of on-going negotiation within which the person can progressively develop ways of behaving that are as continuous as possible with previous behaviour, thus gradually bringing self and role into line.

Of course, it may be a relatively simple matter of appropriate behaviour if the role is one that requires little more than an external performance. On the other hand, it may often involve a large element of changed perception, of seeing meaning, purpose and significance in what is going on. Student life is like this. It is not merely a matter of performing certain tasks or performing them to a certain standard, but coming to understand what is expected and viewing oneself afresh in relation to these (often implicit) demands. In so far as students grow in self-understanding, one may say that the continuity in their lives springs not so much from the constant repetition of similar behaviours, but from the steady renewal of purpose through the discovery of some fairly consistent meanings (Bannister and Fransella, 1971). Thus, to answer Kurt Danziger's question, the thread which runs through our lives may, indeed, be seen in different circumstances *either* as a thread of habit *or* a thread of meaning. Often we shall be able to see that lives are held together by threads of *both* kinds. However, if the line of argument set out here is

correct, it is the thread of meaning which is stronger, less easily broken and more easily repaired.

The argument here has been that, in seeking to understand the process by which anyone comes to terms with a new environment we need a psycho-social, rather than a purely psychological or sociological perspective. It should be noted that similar considerations apply *a fortiori* in respect of any kind of helping relationship. If we need a psycho-social perspective to adequately interpret the process of transition to a new environment, how much more indispensable will such a perspective be for understanding interpersonal help and support. Social psychologists are at one in telling us that it is from interaction with others that we derive our sense of personal identity, though they differ as to precisely how this works. Some have suggested that people are helped interpersonally by being better able to derive a *coherent* sense of self (see Laing, 1971), which is why receiving conflicting messages can be so damaging. Others have emphasized not so much the need for coherence but the need for *positive* feedback about the self as the way to build a satisfactory self-image (see Rogers, 1973). What is not in doubt is that interpersonal relationships are a major source of support to the individual in any situation and especially in a situation of stress such as transition to a new environment. One aspect of the experience of stress is feeling confused and inadequate, unable to form a satisfactory view of oneself in an unfamiliar context. It is for this reason that a relationship which offers an opportunity to build a more optimistic (or even just a less uncertain) view of self will be experienced as helpful.

In this chapter it has been suggested that there may be three rather different approaches to 'transition'. First, it may be treated in relation to the concept of personality. On this view, it is seen as a change of circumstances requiring some sort of adjustment or adaptation on the part of the individual. Second, it may be treated in relation to the concept of role. On this view, it is seen as a process of socialization requiring the learning of a new role. Third, and I suggest preferably, it may be treated in relation to the concept of career. On this view, the process is seen as developing a secure sense of personal identity which can accommodate a variety of life-situations and a good deal of discontinuity between them.

What is wrong with the image of pegs in holes is that it suggests that the transition to student life is simply a matter of predetermined fit. First year students who encounter problems early on are quite likely to think of it like this, and to suggest that the obvious solution is for them to withdraw from the course. The considerations set out here might encourage anyone advising them to be a little more cautious in jumping to that conclusion. There may be a real lack of fit, of course, but neither the individual student nor the role they are trying to fit into are static entities. Both are capable of some adjustment. The student who says 'I will never make it as a student' may be thinking of 'a student' in some stereotyped way, and the appropriate response

might be to suggest that there is no need for him or her to conform to that model. The student has to find his or her own way of 'being a student' which is within the bounds of what the peer group, the course, the institution and society at large will tolerate, but which, nonetheless, represents some sort of continuity with the student's past sense of personal identity. This gives a good deal of scope for mutual adjustment and negotiation.

Working with this model it is possible to see that for an institution to discard a potential student because he or she doesn't fit in, or for a student to withdraw from a course because it doesn't perfectly match up to expectations, may sometimes be unnecessarily drastic. There is often a measure of influence upon, or choice within, a course that the student can exercise. Increasingly, institutions are recognizing the extent to which effective higher education relies on the development of processes of negotiation with students not just about peripheral matters like social events, but about the nature of the course being followed. The process of transition, far from being a cut-and-dried process of checking to see whether you fit, is actually an ongoing process in which both the student and the institution come to terms with each other.

Institutions which seek to recruit non-traditional students, be they mature students, women on engineering courses, ethnic minorities or students from overseas, know they have to make adjustments to provide a more receptive and less hostile environment. Equally, students have to cope with the fact that student life will probably be in some respects very different from what they imagined, and that their course will almost certainly include elements they could not possibly have foreseen. These are both active processes which may need to be undertaken quite consciously. Students who simply wait to see whether the course will suit them, and institutions which simply wait to see whether students will meet their requirements, have each got to do more to accommodate the other.

4

The Changing Student Experience

In exploring the student experience we have already unravelled a number of distinct strands and looked at it from a number of complementary perspectives. It has been shown that, while students often experience problems of one sort or another, the help they need is much more than dealing with problems and extends to continuous support in their development through the whole of their student experience. Consideration of the idea of student development exposed the fact that, while it is true that students experience change on a number of fronts and may be expected to grow psychologically along a number of different dimensions, there are aspects of the student's development that are social and interpersonal rather than simply personal. This idea has been further explored by examining the kinds of personal disruption which characterize the student experience and, in particular, the difficulties associated with transition into student life. On closer inspection the experience of transition has turned out to be neither a set of private difficulties nor an individual developmental experience, but rather a psychosocial process of step-by-step assimilation in which individual and institution come to terms with each other.

The student experience may, however, be seen in a broader perspective altogether, as the corporate, social experience of a segment of the population. There are important sociological considerations about the place of young people in society, their economic status, their political significance, their own self-understanding within the culture and how all these have been subject to historical change. This chapter, therefore, will look at the student experience within a rapidly changing culture, drawing out its socio-economic and politico-cultural significance and, in particular, how it has changed over time.

Past and present

How then can we begin to get a feel for contemporary student life as it is actually lived? It may be necessary to consciously put aside certain items of mental furniture, the images and pictures that are readily conjured up by a

word like 'student'. Here is a male lecturer in his fifties describing his own higher education at Oxford in the late 1950s:

I suppose my student experience was coloured by the fact that we were all together in a college, and the college was small enough for everyone to know each other at least by sight. The college was where we lived; it was the centre of everything for those years. That meant living on the premises, close to each other, and pretty close to some of the lecturers too. But it meant more than that. Looking back, I can see that the college was invested with a kind of symbolic significance – it became a focus of loyalty. There was a lot of intercollegiate rivalry, especially in sport. We wore our college scarves all the time, to show *where* we belonged and to show *that* we belonged. That was it really. It was a matter of belonging to the college. Not just living in it, and certainly not just attending it, but belonging.

Of course, we never used the word 'student' in those days, not at Oxford anyway. We were 'undergraduates'. And 'members' of the College – junior members, but still members. The college servants – yes, they were called that – called us 'Mister X', even though they were old enough to be our fathers! They used to wake us up every morning and bring us hot water for shaving because we didn't have running water in our rooms. And of course we had to wear those black gowns to go to lectures, and for dinner in Hall, and in Chapel. In some ways it was almost a kind of monastic existence – all male and with a strong religious ethos because it was a Christian foundation. The tutors were pretty awesome figures to most of us. We knew them all by sight, even those who taught subjects other than our own, but although we knew their names we didn't really know them as people at all.

Of course, in some ways the atmosphere was quite lax. I had a weekly meeting, on my own, with my particular tutor, and he gave me work to do. Apart from that, I just did what everyone else did – pursued my interests, tried to take advantage of being in a lively cultural centre where things were always happening, and relied on working systematically and hard right through the vacations. The problems? Well, I didn't have enough money for one thing, so I couldn't buy many books. That was a real handicap compared with some other people. Also, there were clubs and societies I would have liked to join but I couldn't afford the subscription. The other problem was time. I simply couldn't get everything in. I never got a job in the vacations – I needed that time for work. My parents understood that. The way we thought of it, it was a privilege to be given a university education, and it involved you in making some sacrifices. Studying hard through the vacations was the only way I could ever have coped. But during term time it seemed better to take advantage of everything that was going on. I never went home in term time.

From the start it was impressed on us that we were not at university to learn anything useful or to acquire training or skills; we were there to

engage in a discipline, to explore for ourselves a bit of knowledge that was already well worked-over and which we were told was worthwhile for its own sake. We were encouraged to develop wide interests, and to take part in lots of social occasions, many of them quite formal, such as dinners and balls where you had to wear the right clothes and to observe the right etiquette. What did I get out of all that? I think there was a strong sense of being absorbed by a tradition, gradually learning to be at home in it, whether it was a matter of social etiquette or of intellectual discipline. It felt like being given a grounding in your cultural heritage, encouraged to stand on this ground, and yet at the same time to stretch yourself within the given frame. It wasn't a matter of being stretched, rather of stretching ourselves. We were helped by the collegiate experience because that meant some of your best friends were doing different subjects. I learnt a lot that way. In a sense you could say that it was not the dons who educated us, but rather that the college made it possible for us to be educated by ourselves, by each other.

It is immediately obvious that the student experience in the 1990s is very different from this. The increased size of modern institutions of higher education probably means that, for many, the experience of student life is one of anonymity. 'Community', therefore, while not necessarily a thing of the past, has radically changed. Students form themselves into friendship groups which remain remarkably static. Shared residence, often male and female students together, is popular, not least because self-catering can be cheaper than living in a hall of residence. In many institutions it is only a minority of students who ever live in college accommodation; in any case, to live in a hall of residence is often quite different from a 'collegiate' experience. Halls of residence may instil little sense of community, none of loyalty, but simply serve the functional purpose of facilitating the initial stage of friendship-making. So, typically, today's student moves into hall in order to find friends with whom to move out as soon as possible.

The idea of 'belonging' no longer seems to fit in this new environment. The larger the institution, the smaller the proportion of students, it seems, who are willing to participate in clubs and societies. Even sports fail to attract more than a minority. Many students travel home very frequently, some nearly every weekend. Convenient rail travel now begins to emerge as a major factor determining a student's choice of institution. Few students are without a student railcard and most travel a great deal. Much the same could be said of lecturers. Few lecturers live 'on the job', and some actually choose to commute 30 miles or more every day. Even when they live nearby they are likely to draw fairly firm lines between their work lives and their private, domestic or family concerns, not encouraging any encroachment of the one into the other. Yet contact between students and staff is relaxed and informal; the element of 'social distance' seems to have largely disappeared. Students are known by their first names as a matter of course and so, as a rule, are their lecturers.

While relationships are fairly relaxed, teaching is often expected to be quite formal. Attempts on the part of lecturers to launch out into less formal methods of teaching are sometimes greeted with disconcerted dismay. Tutors may regretfully apologize that they cannot provide the individual tuition they would like, but students may find the prospect of such close scrutiny somewhat alarming, and frequently fail to take full advantage of such tutorial opportunities as are offered. So although outwardly relationships seem very informal and there is even a good deal of personal intimacy, the character of higher education institutions is increasingly that of a large bureaucracy, the tone of which is initially set by tedious enrolment procedures involving long queues and the completion of endless forms, a mode of welcome for new students which comes in for surprisingly little criticism.

Higher education now takes place, for the most part, in secular institutions from which all trace of religious influence has gone. Many of the old ideals have gone too. Today's students have to be practical and careful if they are to get by, as many of them do, on a very tight budget. Few manage without a substantial parental subsidy, or a bank loan, or by getting a job right through the summer months. They don't buy books unless it is absolutely necessary, and are quick to dispose of them afterwards. This illustrates the down-to-earth instrumentality of the modern student. Higher education is something to avail yourself of for a purpose. Students mostly know why they are there, and expect the institution to serve their purposes. They are inclined to regard as a 'cop out' any suggestion that students should be encouraged to educate each other; it is felt that it is the tutors' job to provide what they are paying for. This has the merit of straightforwardness, but is seriously flawed as a view of higher education. It is perhaps significant that the Students' Unions, once great debating societies, continue into the 1990s as institutions whose chief function appears to be the provision of entertainment (see Barnett, 1990a).¹ Students look to their Union for respite from study, not for a deepening or broadening of it.

These remarkable and far-reaching changes may be attributed, in part, to demography. The student experience, once the prerogative of a fortunate few, has become much more widely available. The supply of 18-year-olds in the population has diminished at the same time as higher education provision has been expanded, so that entry to the higher education experience is less competitive. Given that admission to higher education is in any case skewed towards social classes I and II, many families might quite rightly predict that for their offspring a university or polytechnic place is a virtual certainty. For them, entry to student life may be experienced almost as a natural progression; while there may be some disappointment at failing to secure a place in a specific subject in a given institution at a particular time, as far as many of higher education's clients are concerned there is hardly any competition at all for entry into higher education *in some form or other*. Higher education has never been so available as it is now. So if student life is experienced less as a privilege and more as an entitlement, this simply reflects the

fact that now, at any rate within certain social classes, almost everyone who wants a higher education experience is able to have one.

This is not, of course, to suggest that higher education in Britain has lost its elite character, or that it has yet become an open or a mass system of higher education. It may be more available, but that does not mean it is more accessible. Its clients remain a privileged minority, whether they feel themselves to be so or not. Their selection has effectively taken place further back, well away from higher education itself. The crucial division occurs at age 16 rather than 18; access to higher education now depends more than anything else on staying on in the education system beyond the minimum school-leaving age (Corbett, 1990).² After that, it becomes more a matter of motivation and confidence than of selectivity and exclusion. For most of those who have continued in education to the age of 18 and who seek admission to advanced courses the question is not so much *whether* they will get into higher education, but *where, what* they will study and perhaps *when*.

Representation and reality

There is no doubt that, in the past, the student's family has often served as a useful source of advance information about higher education. The child of graduate parents, and perhaps graduate grandparents too, was able to set out on a career in higher education with an inbuilt advantage. While much has been done to widen access to higher education, at least in the sense of opening the doors of higher education institutions to non-traditional students, it remains true that such students are disadvantaged in that they lack access to traditions of behaviour which higher education has in the past presupposed. However, without denying that such inequalities persist, it needs to be recognized that the nature of student life has now changed to an extent which may paradoxically render this kind of traditional background, at least in some contexts, a source of misinformation. While this group may be in demographic terms still a significant proportion – indeed, a barely diminished proportion overall – yet in cultural terms they no longer represent the centre of gravity of student life. With the possible exception of Oxbridge, the tone is no longer set by those who by background and upbringing are rooted in the traditions and the values of a higher education experience understood as part of a cultural heritage. Rather, in many institutions it is the privileged who are more likely to feel out of place; certainly, it is they who have most to learn about the realities of student life.

It is understandable if graduate parents feel they can be of rather little help to their student offspring in preparing them for student life. As we have seen, even teaching staff in higher education are quite likely to misread the student experience. Today's lecturers are yesterday's students; despite being professionally in touch with student life they often have little direct contact with it and are liable to view it through the spectacles of their own

student experience. While academics know very well the extent to which their subject has been transformed during the course of their own professional lifetime, they do not always appreciate how much the extra-curricular student experience has changed during the same period, perhaps more than the curriculum itself. Given the rapid overall growth of post-school education through recent decades, norms of student behaviour inevitably reflect the values of students with no family tradition of advanced study, and with little to guide them except the cultural images publicly available to all.

Yet the student experience is not only different from that of an earlier generation; it contrasts quite sharply with the view of student life that is current in the popular imagination. Incoming students are often unprepared for the reality of student life. Or perhaps it would be better to say wrongly prepared. The media offer representations of student life which, if not downright misleading, are seriously distorted. Just as policemen and nurses distance themselves from the media portrayals of their respective roles, so academics are inclined to take a quizzical view of university life as represented on television. Yet few would-be students are in a position to be so sceptical. For the school leaver who has little idea of what to expect, TV soap operas, news bulletins, films and even the campus novel, may function as rich sources of information on how to behave on arrival. It has sometimes been suggested that for children in primary schools 'Grange Hill' offers anticipatory socialization into secondary school life; in much the same way, new entrants to the tertiary stage of education may rely heavily on media images to provide at least initial guidance on what is expected, not just in the sense of how to comport themselves, but perhaps even more importantly how to feel, how to experience student life.

Some of them, of course, will have other, more reliable sources of information on which they can draw to construct ideas of what it is to be a student. They may have older brothers and sisters who are or who have recently been students; they may have mixed socially among students before they enrol on courses themselves. The point has already been made that much of higher education's insulation from the rest of life has broken down. Yet it still remains an unfamiliar environment to many. Expansion of higher education has occurred unevenly, with some of the newer institutions developing very quickly indeed and filling many of their places with first-generation undergraduate students, with the result that the character of student life has altered out of all recognition. The general public from which students are recruited has very little understanding of these changes.

Explaining change

How are we to understand these complex processes of change? There is something odd about discussing the student experience as if it were a discrete, distinct entity which changes over time. Take, for example, the point that has

been noted about students travelling home more frequently than they ever did in the past. Why do they do this? Is it because of close ties with parents and kin? Or is it often because of well-established relationships which were formed prior to leaving home? To understand student life as it is actually lived we need to know such things. Are many students effectively not 'living' on campus at all, but treating it as a workplace from which to return 'home'? What defines 'home'? Is it the parental home? Is it some form of group life, shared with a few friends? Or is it, increasingly, a shared living arrangement with a partner, entered into on a fairly permanent basis? The parental home can be a rather problematic notion for many students, since their parents may be divorced or separated, and the question of locating the 'home' is a matter of choice or decision. Large numbers of students elect to be treated as home-based students in the city or town where they have come to study. They find somewhere to live independent of their parents, whom they simply visit from time to time, meanwhile defining their own accommodation, however temporary, as their home.

It is clear that the student experience is not simply one that is undergone or lived through; it is, in some ways, constructed by those living through it. There is a sense in which we get the institutions we deserve. It can be objectively observed that a modern polytechnic is no longer an academic 'community' in the sense that a medieval college was (though new forms of academic community can be discerned in networks of colleagues working in similar fields, linked by the occasional conference and the fax machine) yet that is to reckon without the feelings of those who would find the latter intolerably claustrophobic. Those whose formative educational experiences at secondary school have been in quite large comprehensive institutions are unlikely to be looking for an intimate, collegiate atmosphere for their higher education; on the contrary, they may prefer the familiarity of private friendship networks alongside relative anonymity in public. If offered the kind of collegiate experience not untypical a generation ago they might shrink from it, or, perhaps more likely, transform it by the way they lived it. It is necessary to assert, then, that students today do not just encounter a world of individualism and instrumentality in higher education, they bring a great deal of individualism and instrumentality to it. These characteristics belong within and may partly be explained by reference to our broader cultural and political life.

Solidarity and diversity

Given the wider age-range at the point of entry, we cannot assume that today's students will have a great deal in common. Even among those who come straight from school we should not, perhaps, expect any very strong group identity. Is it possible that those who continue their studies immediately after leaving school, unlike young working people who often develop a strong sense of group life, become committed to a highly individualized and

competitive lifestyle which undermines student life as a shared experience? Does such a contrast mirror the familiar distinction between working-class solidarity and middle-class 'educated' values?

That way of putting it might prompt the reply that, on the contrary, all young people may be seen as a coherent group. From the 1950s onwards they have been explicitly targeted as a key market, a class of consumers. Do they not, then, from this perspective, constitute a group with certain shared values in common, their group identity promoted and sustained by the mass media so as to create a youth culture which transcends social class? This kind of sociological account (Eisenstadt, 1956) may be taken further. Those whose youth is spent in education can, nonetheless, identify themselves closely with those whose youth is spent at work; they might, indeed, have less money, but they can still choose to spend it on the same sorts of things. Campus culture may then be seen as much like youth culture anywhere else, with student life actually coming in due course to epitomize the experience of the young.

While that kind of description might appear to fit student life in the 1960s, it is now hopelessly out of date. The student experience is spoken of less in terms of fun and freedom, and more in terms of anxiety and constraint. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the economics of student life; students are once again becoming very poor. As is often pointed out, this is not quite the same poverty as that endured by other disadvantaged groups, in that for many students it is both a voluntarily chosen and a temporary state. Nonetheless, it remains true that to be a student is once again to be relatively and perhaps absolutely poor, unless there are countervailing circumstances such as wealthy parents or industrial sponsorship. Nor is the poverty as voluntary or as temporary as is sometimes suggested. We are now worlds away from the situation in the 1950s and 1960s, when the middle-aged viewed young people uneasily and perhaps enviously as they confidently and cheekily led the way in fields such as fashion and entertainment. Now, the older generation is more likely to look upon young people with a genuine concern; they seem a vulnerable group who deserve and demand our help and support.

Widespread youth unemployment and the consequent reorganization of the transition from school to work mean that the predicament of the young worker is in many ways similar to that of the student (Frith, 1984:65). Both can mean having one's adult status postponed. 'Young worker' status is no longer to be understood as a step towards the adult world of work. It is possible that those who have no choice but to participate in training schemes may increasingly be treated like, and perhaps even thought of as, in a rather derogatory sense, 'students'. It is also possible that students in higher education who fail to secure employment on graduation will come to be seen as occupying an extended student status, rather like the untrained underclass whose lifestyle they largely share. Considerations of this sort might lead us to suppose that, with the development of training schemes and further education opportunities for virtually all school leavers, there could be a

renewal of the student experience as a common, shared experience for almost all young people.

The view taken here, however, is quite the opposite: that it is the divisions in the student experience which will prove to be most pervasive. Certainly, the introduction of student loans, coupled to the pegging of student grants at existing levels, marks a new downturn in the fortunes of the average student; as the value of the grant steadily diminishes we shall inevitably see greater hardship and increased levels of debt. In such a climate, students who have alternative sources of income will become increasingly conspicuous. The student state, once one of amiable and tolerable poverty, experienced as a unifying predicament over a relatively short period, will act as an amplifier of social as well as intellectual differences, so that the student experience becomes increasingly fractured and fragmented.

In reviewing the student experience it has become abundantly clear that it has changed dramatically within a short space of time. What until quite recently operated as a unifying and cohesive force and offered a common, shared experience based upon tradition and settled commitment, has given way to an open and competitive system, which not only exposes social divisions, but is itself inherently divisive. There have been changes to the composition of the student body, changes in the size and character of higher education institutions, changes in their staffing, changed purposes and, above, all, a changed context. It is hardly surprising, then, that higher education has come to mean different things, to serve different purposes in society and to reflect different sets of priorities. The student state is experienced differently according to family tradition, parental support, prestige of institution, selectivity of subject, credit-worthiness, industrial sponsorship and so on, as well as along lines of gender, race and social class. The fact is that students now have very different experiences in higher education.

This suggests that those who, in whatever capacity, would offer help and support to students have to be prepared to tackle a much wider range of matters than previously. It is no longer just a matter, if it ever was, of seeing students through their homesickness, the ups and downs of their girlfriend/boyfriend crises, and worries about their forthcoming examinations; professional student advisers and counsellors today deal routinely with marriage problems, with debt, with homelessness and family violence. Tutors, too, are affected by these changes and in their support role can easily become involved in matters which seem more appropriate to the case-load of a social worker than to the tutorial responsibilities of an academic. Yet tutors are, and are likely to remain, the front line of student support in higher education institutions. The role of the tutor needs urgent reconsideration and it is to this that we now turn.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Dr Ronald Barnett of the Centre for Higher Education Studies, University of London Institute of Education, not only for this particular point, but more generally for raising issues concerning 'academic community'.
2. Jenny Corbett (1990) draws attention to the social divisions evident in the different career prospects of 18-year-olds entering higher education and those leaving Youth Training, the effects of which, she says, will be 'long term and profound'.

Part 2

Tutorial Support

5

The Tutor's Point of View

Unlike professional support staff, teaching staff may not have a very clear idea of how they are expected to contribute to the support process. Difficulties can arise both from competing definitions of the tutorial role and from conflicting demands upon anyone who tries to combine a tutorial role with other institutional roles and responsibilities.

The designation 'tutor' is notoriously unclear, yet it remains the most appropriate word to use, in the British context, for members of teaching staff in institutions of higher education in so far as they have a responsibility for helping and supporting students. As well as its root meaning of teacher, 'tutor' carries strong historical overtones of what may be called the British tutorial tradition. It harks back to the context of medieval Oxford and Cambridge where an undergraduate would be allocated to a 'tutor' who would keep an eye on him, act *in loco parentis* and possibly be as concerned to monitor his behaviour as a young gentleman as to encourage his intellectual development. At the same time it conveys an echo of the private tutor, once a familiar figure in the English country house. In current usage it continues to convey some sense of moral responsibility and of personal attention. Although in some contexts the word may be used almost interchangeably with 'lecturer', it would not as a rule be used unless there were some suggestion of pastoral care and some likelihood of one-to-one contact with each student. It is used here in preference to the term 'lecturer' which appears to suggest nothing more than a very formal teaching role.

In British higher education 'tutor' has for a long time seemed the natural way to refer to the member of teaching staff who takes a personal interest in a student; and not only in higher education. In secondary education the member of teaching staff who has responsibility for a specific age cohort is called Year Tutor. Although, in practice, this is sometimes a largely administrative function, it is usually conceived as a student-focused or 'pastoral' responsibility as distinct from responsibility for an area of the school curriculum. In higher education there are several different kinds of responsibility which commonly carry the title 'tutor': these include Course Tutor (responsible for running a complete course), Year Tutor (responsible for one year of a course), Personal Tutor (responsible for keeping a watchful eye on the

student's work and progress on an individual basis) and Placement Tutor (responsible for arranging and supervising industrial or professional placements). Institutions differ as to the precise designations of these roles, both as to what they are and what they are called. However, the word 'tutor' is used fairly consistently to designate roles which go beyond a straightforward 'lecturing' role, and to suggest some supervisory role, some personal contact with the student and/or some broad responsibility that may even extend beyond the course itself.

The tutoring experience: an investigation

Given this background, how do tutors themselves view this aspect of their role? How do they cope with the demands on them? A recent study allowed tutors to talk freely about their role in helping and supporting students and invited them to comment on this part of their work (Earwaker, 1989a,b). It gave them an opportunity to voice their frustrations as well as to explain their motivation, and revealed not only an impressive commitment to their students, but considerable confusion and uncertainty about their support role.

The study was based on tape-recorded interviews with the First Year Tutors of each major degree course offered within the institution. It was recognized that the institution's policy for Personal Tutors was beginning to become unworkable in some departments, and it was suspected that there might be an extra burden on the Year Tutors as the obvious and available staff to whom students would look for support. Since it was known that students experienced more problems in the first year of their courses than in subsequent years, it was thought that First Year Tutors, in particular, might be taking a good deal of the strain. This appeared to be true, though not the whole truth.

It became clear that Course Leaders (the title given to Course Tutors of large courses) were being consulted by students even more than Year Tutors. Consequently, as the study progressed, some Course Leaders were interviewed and also other staff otherwise identified as key members of their departments by virtue of their responsibility for and/or experience of student support. The aim was to gain a bird's eye view of how support for students was operating across the whole institution.

The main results of this investigation can be quite briefly summarized. It was clear that tutors were giving a great deal of support to students. The scale and the severity of the problems revealed were surprising, even sometimes startling. There were a number of staff who were actually trying to serve as 'the first person the student turns to' for more than 100 students. Naturally, this was taking up a large proportion of their time, even when the problems were relatively trivial; but on the evidence of these interviews major problems were cropping up quite frequently, some involving acute personal distress. The general picture that emerged was that, as suspected, the bulk of

the task of giving personal help and support to students was being carried out by a relatively small number of staff, and was being experienced by them as something of a burden. It was clear that, even while a personal tutorial system remained formally in place, Year Tutors and Course Tutors who made themselves readily available to students were liable to be overwhelmed by the demands on them.

The contribution of tutors to student support

The tutors were asked to give some examples of the sort of matters they found themselves having to deal with. One tutor with responsibility for a first year group of only 24 students referred to recent cases of family violence, sexual harassment, bereavement, divorce, ill-health and disability. Another mentioned problems associated with alcohol misuse, unplanned pregnancies and arranged marriages. Another, responsible for 85 students mostly aged 18 or 19, spoke of parental divorce and family bereavements, together with ill-health, and academic and study problems, as matters that cropped up *nearly every week* in some form or other. One member of staff began by mentioning relatively minor problems such as those of adjustment to the course, the problems of non-traditional students, and the need to clarify procedural matters, but then went on to cite a whole range of personal problems which included relationship difficulties, some serious medical conditions, and two cases of 'very serious' psychological problems; this young tutor had only been working in the institution for six months.

Another tutor, asked to cite some typical problems, responded like this:

If I just list what has happened to me in the last fortnight. I've got one girl who's getting beaten up by her live-in man, and I referred her to the counsellor. I've got one who's involved in a rather nasty sexual harassment case in halls of residence – who's involved with the police. And also having got all that on her shoulders she's lost her grandma. So she's in a turmoil. I've got another one whose parents have just gone through a particularly nasty divorce, and both parents seem to be visiting all the problems on the girl. So she doesn't know which way is up – she just sits there. I've got one who's got a health problem, incapable of working – continual headaches. I've got another one who's got physical incapacity. And it just goes on and on and on . . .

It was noticeable that the number of serious problems dealt with seemed to remain remarkably constant from one tutor to another. Year Tutors responsible for 20 students told similar stories to those with well over 100. This strongly suggests that a great many student problems never come to the attention of any tutor at all, but are simply submerged by weight of numbers. Whereas within a small student group cases of illness are immediately noticed and enquiries made, the larger the group, the greater the risk of a student being completely 'invisible'. One tutor described it as dealing with

the tip of an iceberg; with some 200 students in a year group, he had found on more than one occasion that a student had left the course before any staff were aware that there was any kind of difficulty. The cause of concern here was not so much that the students had dropped out, but that they had done so without any debriefing of what could have been a very negative experience.

Obviously, some tutors are much more approachable than others. It is worth recording the reluctance, even distaste, with which some teaching staff found themselves being drawn into students' personal problems, while at the same time finding it impossible to avoid. These were not, on the whole, staff who were naturally drawn to this kind of role; rather, they were conscientious tutors who were responding to students' needs as best they could.

One who expressed considerable reluctance to get involved in students' personal problems said that students came to talk to him 'with alarming regularity' and that he felt quite weighed down by this:

I try to keep it as professional and distant a relationship as possible, and don't really want to know what their problems are unless it starts really affecting their work.

However, despite this resolve he found it impossible to carry out his teaching and administrative roles properly without the personal life of the student constantly encroaching:

I ask them to bring their work in and we talk about it . . . When other people are around you tend to temper it, but I'll actually say I'm sorry but you're grossly underachieving – you know, put it very straight on the line. I'll say you're not working efficiently. And *why* aren't you working efficiently? Boom! Then suddenly you find you're talking about their parents' divorce and the sordid details of what's happening here. And why. And you think 'Do I really want to know this?' I suppose the answer is I shouldn't ask the question 'Why aren't you working properly?'. But it's not sufficient just to say 'You're not working', is it, from a professional point of view?

Here was tutor who, without any eagerness on his part, was becoming involved in a large number of quite complex personal problems. Most of the tutors interviewed were similarly able to reel off a long list of recent cases requiring support. One of the more experienced tutors responded like this:

Illness, yes. Somebody has something like glandular fever – to start with they probably don't realize they've got it – and what they've got is this lethargy, this inability to drive themselves. Very often they see themselves as being lazy, and that's not good, because of their own esteem. They get worried thinking 'I'm lazy', and getting behind and getting more worried. Other problems are things like an Asian student – he had problems with his hearing at one time, but his biggest problem seemed to be that his family were trying to marry him with someone else who he

wasn't at all sure about . . . There are some problems with home life. Parents ill. And the daughter is always expected to go back and help – to some extent, you know. They worry about things like that. We had problems with one student – his wife decided to move, and he was wanting to do this course here. I was never sure of the truth of the situation. I didn't know whether he was telling me the truth. There's another student – not very happy about being failed on his first year and had to resit it. For a long time he was very bitter about that. So generally speaking he just . . . I think he called in to see a lot of different people, to tell them what he didn't like about it!

The picture which emerges is of tutors being routinely drawn into a whole series of thorny human problems, all of them potentially quite serious for the people concerned. This kind of evidence from tutors, as well as supporting the contention that tutors play a major role in student support, also shows clearly why they cannot possibly meet every need. Several tutors confessed that they were at times quite overwhelmed by the scale and severity of the problems which were brought to them.

Tutors' feelings about their support role

The evidence of this study is that most of the tutors were operating under considerable pressure. Nearly all of those interviewed expressed some anxiety about this part of their work. Most felt very unsure of themselves in this area, and sought reassurance that they were dealing with these matters appropriately. The majority admitted to feeling 'out of their depth' at times. Some also wondered whether they were becoming too deeply involved in supporting students, so that the students' problems got out of proportion; others worried about the effect their commitment to students was having on the rest of their work. Clearly, for these tutors their role in support was undertaken with a good deal of uneasiness and uncertainty.

In view of the kinds of problems they were attempting to deal with, it is hardly surprising that they should have felt themselves somewhat inadequate at times. More than one male tutor described himself as completely non-plussed when a female student wanted to talk with him about her unplanned pregnancy; this was something for which, as young academics, they were totally unprepared. One of them voiced his anxiety like this:

Every year there will be two, three, maybe four pregnancies, that people on the course come and tell me about. It surprised me when it first happened, the first year I was here, that they would come and tell me about it, but they do. Very regularly. I found that very difficult to deal with . . . These are not problems I've encountered much in the past . . . At first I just didn't know where to go. It was an aspect of the job I hadn't anticipated. As I've been longer in it I think I've perhaps thought it out a bit more. But I still recognize my need for support of

some sort. Certainly the first pregnancy, the first girl who came to tell me she was pregnant, I didn't know what to say.

If some feel somewhat out of their depth through lack of experience, others feel disqualified from discussing certain matters for the opposite reason, that they are too close to home. On the same subject, one woman lecturer said:

The thing that I'm actually dreading arising, and I would have to step back from this immediately, is if I had a girl coming to say that she was pregnant. I would find that extremely difficult because my own personal feelings about abortion would be very difficult I think – to actually lay objectively all the options out, and I think I would have to act immediately to step back from that, and say 'Look you must go and see somebody else for advice on this'.

Some of those interviewed, while keenly aware of their own lack of appropriate skills, were nonetheless rather ambivalent when asked if they would like opportunities for further training. Some were already feeling under such pressure that they did not see how they could do anything more. Nor, in most cases, did they want to jeopardize their academic careers by settling into a student support role. Typically they were asking for more 'back-up'. Several staff suggested the production of some written guidelines for all staff on how to operate in a student support role, together with basic information about the institution's support services. Others wanted help to think through their support role and to develop their support skills. It was very clear from this that, as well as needing information and training, these staff were themselves in need of support. They were acutely aware of the tensions and ambiguities in their roles, struggling to do justice to tasks which they felt often pulled them in different directions.

Some, indeed, saw themselves as the unsung heroes of the institution, keeping courses operating smoothly, ensuring that students remained, as far as possible, satisfied customers and going out of their way to help individual students with particular problems. Their impression was that the work to which they were devoting themselves was undervalued by the institution, consistently taken for granted and invariably eclipsed by the publicity given to new initiatives. While some claimed the moral high ground, suggesting that the institution's obligations to students should come first, others argued more pragmatically that it was not in the institution's long-term interests to put at risk the personal attention to students on which its reputation with its clients ultimately depended.

There was no sign of resentment that conscientious performance of a student support role generally went unrewarded; rather, there was a wry recognition that, as one tutor said, 'I must be mad to do it.' They blamed themselves for getting into what could easily become, they frankly recognized, a career cul-de-sac. Their anxiety on this score was not without justification. One might suppose that the staff most closely involved in supporting students would be relatively experienced staff, but in fact the opposite proved

to be the case. Tutors with specific responsibility for the first year of each major degree programme were in some cases the most junior and least experienced members of their departments. This seems to be a reflection of the low status implicitly accorded to the student support role. The exceptions were a small number of very experienced staff who continued to give priority to student support and who had remained in positions such as First Year Tutor for many years. These staff appeared to recognize, in some cases quite explicitly, that in so far as they devoted themselves to students they could be putting their professional careers at risk. This was, to be sure, a choice quite wittingly and uncomplainingly made, but it is hardly right that it should have confronted them in this form.

The study was specifically concerned with tutors who had taken responsibility for student support and were conscientiously trying to offer students the help they needed. Such tutors are almost certainly untypical, and one should be cautious about drawing generalized conclusions from this evidence. Nonetheless, this study shows not only that these tutors were making a very substantial contribution to student support, but that this was being done at considerable personal cost. They were sometimes overwhelmed by the scale and severity of the problems brought to them. They appeared to be unsure about where their responsibility ended, doubtful about how much their institution valued this aspect of their work and confused about where to get further help. On the evidence of this study, then, tutors need help in all these ways if they are to continue to operate as key supports for their students; it is essential that the limits of the role should be clearly marked out, that the role be publicly recognized as important, and that sources of back-up and support be clearly identified.

Sources of role strain

It must, nonetheless, be recognized that there are certain elements of role strain that are inescapable whenever members of teaching staff are expected to act in a support role. This kind of role is inherently problematic and potentially stressful with or without adequate back-up. Various sources of role strain can be identified.

First, tutors appear to be uncertain how to reconcile the development of a personal relationship with the performance of a professional task. As already indicated, the promotion prospects of staff could be adversely affected by their willingness to take their student support function seriously. This might occur directly, either in straightforward discrimination against those who were seen as student-centred rather than research-centred or by drafting into the support role those who were of lowest status, thereby making their career progression more difficult. It might also occur indirectly, in that staff who devoted more time to helping and supporting students could easily fall behind in research and consultancy, which might then be used as indicators of their performance when it came to promotion or upgrading.

Many of those interviewed spoke of their 'open door' policy. They tried to be available to students whenever they were free of timetabled commitments, and would deliberately signal this availability by working with their office door propped open. The cost of this to an academic can be very high. In a context in which staff are expected to develop their own research projects, to publish, to engage in consultancy and to generate income, not to mention preparation of lectures and assessment of students' work, one can hardly expect staff to tolerate, let alone encourage, interruptions from students throughout the whole of the working day. What can happen is that, as the majority of staff are gradually compelled to reduce their availability, those who do not do so risk being overwhelmed not only by their own students, but by everybody else's as well. This not only puts an intolerable burden on a small number of staff; it leads to a culture in which the only staff who have time for students are those who have effectively given up on some of their other responsibilities.

However, devoting time to students should not have to mean being constantly interrupted. Cannot students be seen by appointment? Staff who are working with a model of higher education that expects a friendly tutor to be on hand at the point of difficulty are inclined to say that problems cannot be timetabled and that crises are, by definition, unexpected. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of relationship which characterizes higher education as such – flexible arrangements, individual attention and pastoral concern. Yet behind this approach lies an unspoken assumption about the amateur nature of the encounter; it is of the essence of the tutorial intervention that it is unscripted and *ad hoc*. It seems important to challenge both this kind of amateur tradition and the professionalism that would transform the role of tutor into that of counsellor.

Tutors sometimes find it difficult to operate both as a source of support and as an arbiter of standards. Tutors may be privy to all kinds of confidential information about the student's personal circumstances which colour their judgement of the student's performance. In particular, they are torn between their responsibility as tutors to act in the best interests of the student and their responsibility as examiners to make an objective assessment of the student's work. Because it has been felt that the tutor may be required to act as a kind of advocate on the student's behalf, it has sometimes been suggested that, as a matter of principle, students should be allocated personal tutors who have no examining or assessment role in their course. However, in practice it is not always possible or sensible to separate the two roles. Staff are normally involved in the assessment of the students they teach, so the application of this principle means allocating students personal tutors who they will not meet in the ordinary way. Yet it has been found that to allocate students to tutors they never meet in the classroom is to put both in an almost impossible position from which a relationship may never get started.

It surely has to be acknowledged that if the role of tutor includes both teaching and support then it must involve a certain amount of role strain. Tutors cannot offer total independence or impartiality. What they can offer is

a different kind of service in which their experience, their knowledge of the course, and their advice may all be extremely valuable. Unless they renounce their teaching role and all that it implies, including assessment, they cannot operate as if they have no responsibility except to their client. This is to suggest that the role of tutor needs to be carefully distinguished from that of counsellor. It does not mean that tutors have to operate amateurishly, but that appropriate professional standards, in relation to confidentiality for instance, have to be worked out.

One might add here that there are particular difficulties in reconciling the tutor's responsibility towards the student with the student's right to privacy. Just as assumptions are often made concerning the tutor's ready availability to the student, so the willingness of the student to enter into a personal relationship with his or her tutor is sometimes taken for granted. However, people differ as to how much of their personal lives they are willing to share with others. The possibilities of misunderstanding here are very great, especially in a relationship which is not between equals, and cannot be, given the institutional context. Well-meaning attempts to help others may fail or even be personally damaging if elements of bullying or patronizing are allowed to creep in.

Third, tutors are far from clear about the limits of their responsibilities in respect of their students, often only turning to other agencies as a last resort. In the study referred to above, tutors were mostly rather reluctant to refer their students to anyone else. There were also a few rather disturbing cases when the back-up had apparently not been available when required. As a result, teaching staff faced with a case of acute mental distress had been unable to contact any other support agencies and they readily admitted that on these occasions they had felt extremely vulnerable. While it cannot be stated too strongly that student support is not just about coping with crises, there clearly has to be a reliable system of emergency cover on which tutors know they can rely. It is not fair to ask teaching staff to take on support roles which may expose them to difficult situations without either the necessary training or effective back-up support.

Hardly any of the tutors in the study made use of the full range of institutional provision. The usual pattern was that they would make contact sooner or later with, say, the student counsellor or one of the chaplains, and thereafter return again and again to the same person for help. It was as if tutors were finding their own way through the system, and then sticking to known and reliable routes. Whether a student was referred to the counselling service or to the chaplaincy might then depend not on careful attention to the student's specific needs or wishes, but rather on the contacts their tutor happened to have made in the past. Thus, despite the wide range of resources on offer within the institution, tutors were operating with quite a narrow repertoire of responses.

Yet there are many sources of support available. As well as the formal agencies provided by institutions and the numerous agencies available within the community there are the informal relationships within the student group,

and contacts with family and friends, which for many students are the most effective supports. Yet teaching staff are often insufficiently aware of all these other sources of help. Because they often do not have any sense of how their role complements, and is complemented by, other sources of support it assumes an exaggerated importance and becomes a burden which cannot be laid down. The effect is not only to impede referral, but to reinforce tutors' feelings of personal responsibility, that they alone can provide the support the student needs. This may not be the best way of helping the student; worse, it may be very unhelpful to the student if the relationship becomes such that either the student or tutor finds it difficult to let go.

The three chapters which follow develop these three sets of issues further. Chapter 6 explores the nature of the tutorial relationship, insisting that it is no simple friendship between equals, but a professional relationship, yet at the same time resisting the conclusion that it is to be characterized as counselling. Chapter 7 tackles the question of confidentiality, especially as it confronts the tutor who has responsibilities for both support and assessment. Chapter 8 discusses the tutor's role within the overall support network with a view to clarifying questions about the limits of the tutor's support role and about referral to other helping agencies.

6

The Tutorial Relationship

We have seen that teaching staff in their support role have to cope with a range of ambiguities, tensions and conflicting responsibilities. They are, therefore, in quite a different position from that of professional support staff. On the other hand, their position needs to be distinguished from that of a friend. For a member of staff in an institution of higher education to give help and support to a student cannot be equated with one student helping another. Why not?

It is the institutional context which sets limits to the nature of the relationship. A tutor and a student may belong to the same institution, but they belong there on different terms. For both it is their workplace, but whereas for one it is the place of employment, involving a commitment to deliver a service according to a contract, for the other it is the place where the particular services they seek are to be obtained.

It is not just that each occupies a distinct role; the roles are related to each other in such a way that the tutor is presumed to know things that the student does not yet know. This is a necessary consequence of setting up social encounters of this sort where two people come into contact in order that one shall learn from, and with the help of, the other.

This does not, of course, mean that each cannot respect the other; a context of mutual respect is often required for optimum learning. Nor does the student's tacit acknowledgement of the tutor's status with respect to a specific context have to be generalized to cover any more than is covered by the course. It might be possible to think of the teaching/learning relationship as quite detached from everything else, a purely functional affair, so that one consults one's tutor rather in the way that one goes to get one's hair cut. Clearly, this is affected by the subject and level of study; it is very hard to conceive of higher education as narrowly as this. Consequently, there will almost certainly be elements of role strain when tutor and student meet informally outside the classroom and especially when they meet on the specific understanding that the tutor is to offer the student some kind of personal help, whether in the form of advice, guidance or support, since it is the teaching relationship that will be the determinative one. They meet *as* tutor and student in what is essentially a working relationship, not a social one.

Interviewing, counselling and tutoring

Surprisingly little has been written about tutoring and, in particular, the one-to-one tutorial (Bramley, 1977; Lewis, 1984; McMahon, 1985; Lublin, 1987; Jacques, 1989), but there is, of course, a considerable body of literature both on interviewing and on counselling, either of which might be expected to yield useful insights. The fact is, however, that these two bodies of literature take very different approaches. A good interviewer has a clear idea of where the conversation is going, keeps firm control of it, and dictates its direction. A good counsellor, on the other hand, is one who allows the client to determine the content, the direction and even the pace of the conversation. Indeed, according to one very influential theory (Rogers, 1973), counselling skill lies precisely in *not* being directive; the aim is to be, as far as possible, client-centred, never to dominate or to control, but always to enable or to facilitate the functioning of the other. Thus, the best counsellors are those who can draw out of even the most reticent and inarticulate client what it is that the client genuinely feels or wants. Whereas the skilled counsellor is one who keeps an open mind and can follow the lead of the client, the skilled interviewer is one who wastes no time in getting to the point, and who has no doubt about what the point is since it has already been predetermined without reference to the other person.

So is individual tutoring to be understood as a sort of interviewing or as a sort of counselling? If we think of tutoring as a kind of interviewing we shall expect the skilled tutor to have a clear idea of the purpose of the tutorial, and to make this clear to the student. We shall regard as somewhat unprofessional the tutor who approaches tutorials unprepared, who offers students a completely open agenda, whose tutorials range widely over a number of different matters and rarely come to a tidy conclusion. On the other hand, if we think of tutoring as a kind of counselling we shall expect the skilled tutor to be a good listener who allows the student to talk freely without interruption, and who can elicit from the student with a minimum of prompts whatever it is that the student wants to say. We shall regard as somewhat unprofessional the tutor who has a fixed idea about the function of the tutorial, its content or its form, or both, and who tries to help the student by giving clear and firm guidance or a clearly defined set of procedures to follow. By polarizing the issues in this way it is possible to see that the activity of tutoring is, of course, not quite like either interviewing or counselling, even though it may usefully be compared to both, and at different times and in different contexts it may be appropriate for tutors to draw on either interviewing or counselling skills. Tutoring may be conceived as occupying the middle ground between the two, occasionally verging on one or other, but to be identified with neither.

Although little has been written specifically about tutoring, there are other interpersonal encounters, especially professional-lay consultations, which have been quite extensively studied. This work could be relevant to the tutorial in that many of the same issues are present. One interesting study of

doctor-patient interaction (Strong, 1979), found that doctors operated in a number of different modes, two of which were termed the 'clinical' and the 'collegial'. Occasionally, the doctor was able to talk to the patient or the patient's relatives on something like an equal footing, using the correct medical terms, and discussing the case in much the same way as with a colleague. This 'collegial' style of interacting was, however, relatively rare. Mostly, the doctors in the study adopted the 'clinical' approach, offering patients crude oversimplifications of their diagnosis and prescribing treatments dogmatically and without any discussion. This may be a useful distinction for tutors to consider. Are there different ways of conducting tutorials? Do some students somehow manage to qualify for a more 'collegial' relationship, in which they are treated as at least potential equals, so that problems are tackled jointly ('What are we going to do about this?') and within a relationship of trust? If so, this might contrast quite starkly with a mode of interacting with students in which the tutor, instead of negotiating the next step with the student, feels it necessary to tell the student what to do.

Among health professionals it is a commonplace to say that we relate to other people differently according to how we define them, as 'well' or 'sick'. This has sometimes been used as a way of distinguishing between psychotherapy and counselling (Arbuckle, 1967): the former starts from the supposition that the client is 'sick' or in some way needs help to recover the status of a normal human being; the latter tries hard to grant 'normal' status from the start, to respect the client's wishes and to involve the client in his or her own treatment as a matter of principle. Whether or not that holds as a distinction between psychotherapy and counselling, it certainly offers a useful way of distinguishing different ways of relating to the people we are trying to help. If we treat them at the outset as people worthy of our respect we shall behave quite differently than if we regard them as people who, however temporarily, or in however limited a context, have no sensible opinions to offer, since their predicament disqualifies them from engaging with us on that footing.

Similarly, among social workers it has been noted that effective provision of help appears to depend on whether or not the client is perceived as 'worthy', i.e. worth helping (Rees, 1978:107). The client, it is said, has to project and the professional has to recognize what has been called 'a moral character'. It appears, then, that the tutor's initial assessment of the student may be crucial. It is not just, or mainly, in terms of ability (brightest in the class) or academic status (a fourth year Honours student) that the student is assessed, but in terms of what might be termed 'moral status'. The tutorial will be conducted very differently according to whether the tutor judges the student to be generally a worthy person, well-intentioned, honest, reliable and hard-working, or whether the tutor suspects that the student is rather lazy, likely to make excuses and that the excuses could be invented.

In these encounters and interviews (patients consulting their doctor, clients being interviewed by a social worker) the patient or client will often be at a severe disadvantage. Similarly, the student going to see his or her tutor is in a weak position. The question of who controls the interaction is,

therefore, a crucial one. The interview format suggests that the interviewer is in control: the counselling format suggests, more interestingly, that while the counsellor potentially has considerable influence in the situation this status is being deliberately renounced in favour of giving the client their say and trying to make sure it is heard. It is here that the idea of an agenda may be helpful. For the distinction between interviewing and counselling is not, of course, that one has a clear agenda while the other does not, but that in one case the agenda is determined by the professional helper while in the other it is determined by the client. Who then determines the agenda when tutor and student meet?

The tutorial: its agenda and its management

Will there be an agenda at all? Both teaching and support can appear as no more than just chatting to students; but if a tutorial is being conducted properly there will be nothing casual about it and its purposes might well be made explicit. The tutorial can then be seen as a professional task carried out by the tutor in the course of his or her professional duties and not something done out of kindness or because of a personal interest in the student.

It might, in any case, seem obvious that the agenda of the tutorial, whether dealing with an academic or personal problem, is set by the student and that it should take shape around the student's expressed needs – a question to be answered or a difficulty resolved. Yet this is to return to the remedial model criticized previously. If tutorial contact is seen not as trouble-shooting, but as fostering ongoing development, we have to acknowledge that the student may not be in a very good position to assess his or her own development, whether academic or personal, and may need help in finding the most appropriate starting-point.

Tutors may sometimes have to take the initiative in raising matters of concern, possibly setting up a tutorial which the student has not requested. Even when the initiative is entirely the student's, the tutor may wonder whether there is perhaps more to the student's agenda than has been revealed, and may probe a little to find out more. It is, of course, possible that there is more to it than they have said; there may even be more to it than they have so far realized. The student may describe symptoms without being able to determine their underlying cause. They may misdescribe or even misperceive their own problems. Ever since Freud, psychologists have claimed that there may be ways in which someone else may be able to understand you better than you can yourself. You may not appreciate the full extent or the real nature of your problem; you may not even realize that you have a problem at all. The individual is sometimes mistaken and may be helped by having this gently pointed out.

Sometimes, then, the agenda which the student brings gets altered or amended as the tutorial proceeds; the tutor focuses attention onto what lies *behind* what the student has said. If it is an academic problem, something

misunderstood, the tutor may be able to convert an inarticulate question into a more pertinent one. If it is a more personal matter, again the tutor may be able to draw the student away from his or her own agenda (e.g. self-pity) and focus attention onto something else which represents a realistic way forward, a practical 'next step'. On the other hand, of course, the tutor may be clumsy, lacking the necessary skills and the agenda might then change in an unhelpful way, such as when the student wishes to talk about something and the tutor (because he or she feels insecure on that subject or because it is a personally painful matter which the tutor cannot handle) diverts attention away from this. This can happen simply by accident if the tutor is not alert to the agenda which the student has brought, and quick to identify it clearly and to bring it into focus.

However, there is another scenario which can be described in terms of 'agenda'; that is, when there is a 'hidden' agenda which the student finds it difficult to talk about. Counsellors are familiar with the case of the client who presents one problem when really there is another lurking behind, the first serving simply as a 'calling card'. The skill lies in detecting the hidden agenda, and gently bringing it out into the open so that it can be dealt with. Tutors are not usually trained to do anything like this. Often it does not occur to them that there will be more to uncover besides what the student tells them initially. Doctors are familiar with the patient who consults them about a relatively trivial problem, and then, just as they are about to leave, says 'And while I'm here, doctor . . .' and raises a much more serious matter which is for some reason more difficult to talk about. Yet tutors, even if fully convinced that the student should supply the agenda and eager to follow the student's lead, are sometimes quite surprised at the idea that the student might not have told the full story straight out. Exercises in discovering the hidden agenda may, therefore, be some of the best introductions to training for tutors.

What these reflections seem to suggest is that it is not so much that the student sets the agenda, or that the tutor allows the student to set the agenda, but rather that the student, in a sense, *is* the agenda and that it is the tutor's job to ensure that this is so. That way of putting it seems to do more justice to the reality of the tutorial situation, though of course the student is no mere passive subject. The tutor cannot abdicate responsibility for managing the interaction.

However, if we say that the tutor has the main responsibility for managing the interaction, then how is this best done?

When two people engage in dialogue, they are doing much more than exchanging words and information. They are exchanging meanings. Skilled personal interaction involves an awareness that the words spoken and the meaning intended do not always correspond exactly. This is not only true of the inarticulate person who doesn't express him or herself very well, but also of the fluent speaker who uses language flexibly and skilfully. Conversation has to be analysed rather as a game with 'moves'. One may throw down a challenge, hold out an olive-branch or offer congratulations, while the actual

words used might be in the form of, say, a question which, written down, would look like a request for information. Person-to-person discussion quickly runs into difficulties if these linguistic subtleties are not recognized. And often they are not, especially in a tutor–student conversation where a lot may be at stake, and where, if misunderstandings arise, the temptation to quote back the actual words used may be very great.

It is not only that in trying to understand what someone else is saying we have to read between the lines; we also have to read their non-verbal communication which may be more eloquent than their actual words. One of the great advantages of a tutorial is that it provides an opportunity to pay attention to one student at a time; it allows the tutor to concentrate on the needs of a particular individual and to listen to what he or she ‘says’ in whatever way. If the tutor simply uses it as an opportunity to talk and to teach, this opportunity has been lost or wasted.

When people are in a relatively strong position, we know how they are most likely to behave. They will initiate the interaction and they will determine when it ends; they will set the agenda, ask the questions and decide whether the answers are adequate or not; they will often address the other informally; and they will feel free to interrupt and to change the subject at any point. Non-verbal behaviour, too, will be used to establish and maintain dominance, e.g. not looking at the other so as to give little chance of feedback, ignoring any signs that the other is either agreeing or disagreeing, or is puzzled or confused or embarrassed, occasionally looking at the other too long and too hard, so that they feel their personal space is being invaded (Gahagan, 1984:62f). This could be a description of a typical tutorial. There is no doubt who is in control. The student is likely to defer to the tutor, to wait for the tutor to speak first and signal when the tutorial should come to an end, to let the tutor determine the agenda, to respond rather than to initiate, to follow any changes of direction and to give way whenever interrupted (Gahagan, 1984:74f). Taken together these are unmistakable signs of dominance and submission.

However, a tutorial does not have to be conducted like this, and it should not be conceived as something the tutor ‘gives’ and the student ‘receives’, but rather as something which happens *between* two people, an interaction. It involves collaboration and partnership. If there is an analogy with a piece of music, it is not one played by the tutor, and heard and responded to by the student, but rather a duet, played by both together and brought off jointly. Perhaps the most appropriate analogy is that of a dance (Stern, 1977). There are two parties to it; ideally, whatever happens has to be mutually understood, agreed and accepted. Often it is very far from this ideal.

What needs to be underlined here is the fact that, although we may analyse a tutorial as a social encounter, drawing on the insights and language of social psychology to interpret what is going on, nonetheless, the tutorial is a rather special example of such interaction in that it is by definition contrived. As we have seen, the tutor is in the formal sense responsible for managing the interaction. It is, therefore, not quite like a dance or a duet in

which the two partners find mutually satisfying ways of performing. It is a dance in which one of the partners 'leads'. Of course, the tutor may be socially clumsy, awkward or shy in this kind of social setting; and the student may be extremely skilled at social interaction. In practice, it is possible that the student may, in effect, conduct the tutorial. Yet that is not what is meant to happen. It is the tutor's responsibility to manage, on behalf of the student, what is essentially an interactive process.

The use and abuse of power

People have different tolerances with regard to their personal affairs, and what one person regards as taking a friendly interest, another may regard as an unwarranted invasion of his or her private life. Some students may be highly sensitive on such matters, guarding their privacy quite jealously, so that an innocent enquiry about where they are spending the summer vacation will be felt to be inappropriate and intrusive, and may get a frosty response. Some may have areas of their life which are for some reason 'no go' areas to all but their closest friends, yet in other respects may be quite relaxed and open.

Apart from individual sensitivities and particularly difficult personal circumstances, there are cultural and gender differences which can lead easily to misunderstanding. A female student who told her male tutor that she had to go into hospital for a few days might not expect to be quizzed for details as to exactly what was wrong; yet a male student in the same circumstances would probably interpret such questions as friendly concern. There are wide differences in the amount of psychological space each individual expects for him or herself and habitually allows to others. The extent to which personal matters, concerning family life for instance, are spoken of outside the home can vary greatly. Cultural and religious inhibitions sometimes render whole areas of life 'taboo'. To receive confidences from someone else is to have power over them; by confiding in you, the other person becomes vulnerable to you. While it is only within a safe relationship that such a risk can be contemplated, it is always a risky procedure.

What happens when the tutor tries to share the student's vulnerability by choosing to come off his or her pedestal, admitting to human failings and offering to engage with the student as a fallible human being? A willingness to expose oneself and to let one's own vulnerability show can go some way towards redressing the imbalance of power. Professional counsellors sometimes use disclosure of bits of themselves as a deliberate tool in helping the other. Tutors, by referring only sparingly to their personal lives, not in a self-indulgent way, but with careful control and self-discipline, may enhance their performance of their helping role. A skilful and thoroughly professional performance does not rule out relating to people in a very personal way.

Of course, people who come seeking help with their problems do not want to hear about anyone else's. Yet within a long-term relationship it may be

quite natural for the helper to reveal things about him or herself as a way of getting alongside the other. So while as a general rule tutors need to refrain from talking about themselves, it is possible to make discriminating use of one's own personal history to enhance one's effectiveness in helping. A tutor anxious to encourage a student who has just failed an examination, for instance, might reveal the fact that he or she once had to resit an important examination. Such a disclosure might enable the student to relate to the tutor as a person rather than simply as a representative of the institution or of a class of people who do not have problems.

The essential point, though, is that this is still a very 'powerful' thing to do. If the disclosure is done deliberately, not inadvertently, it falls into place as part of the tutor's attempt to act responsibly to 'manage' the encounter for the benefit of the student. Tutors may allow some of their own vulnerability to show, but that does not mean breaking down in tears with someone who is emotionally upset; the aim is to engage with the experience of the other, but without totally identifying with it so as to have no detachment left to offer them.

We can now identify three aspects of interpersonal power as it affects the tutorial relationship.

First, it is not just that in the context of higher education tutors are on a different footing from, and respected by, students, but that they are *entitled* to be. They have the major responsibility for managing the interaction *and rightly so*.

Yet the student is not necessarily disadvantaged by being the weaker party. Within the tutor–student relationship there are built-in assumptions which act in the student's interests. For instance, a tutor cannot legitimately respond to a student's request for help with a shrug, or say 'There's nothing I can do; I have no more influence here than you do.' Within this professional context the power of the tutor is supposed to be available to the student. It is an abuse of this professionally-bestowed power if it is exercised irresponsibly or selfishly. It is, indeed, a kind of breach of contract, in the sense that the student as client is, indirectly, buying a service from the tutor. The fact that what students are buying is tutelage, which implies putting themselves under the tutors's guidance, makes no difference. They are entitled to get what they bargained for, no more and no less.

Of course, the difficulty with buying a higher education experience is that the client can often have only a rather hazy idea of what he or she wants in advance of getting it. That is why a great deal of trust is required. What precisely is involved may only gradually become clear as the course proceeds. It may pose sharp challenges to beliefs and commitments, and be experienced as a process of personal as well as intellectual upheaval. It may involve specific experiences which the student finds uncongenial or initially threatening, e.g. an industrial placement, a presentation to the rest of the class, participation in a role play exercise, which the tutor is entitled to insist are essential if the student is to gain full benefit. At the same time, the student, by enrolling on a course, is not giving the tutor a blank

cheque; in a tutorial relationship students do not have to follow wherever the tutor leads. There are certain procedural principles which are generally presupposed within this context by virtue of being written into the shared understanding of the educational process: the student is not contracting to be bullied into learning, or to be frightened into agreement. By enrolling for a course the student is not giving permission to be harassed, sexually or otherwise.

The tutor is in a very different position, able to enter the contract with both eyes wide open. By undertaking to deliver a service for payment, the tutor implicitly acknowledges that it may involve uncongenial tasks, inconvenient duties and tiresome responsibilities. Yet it is understood to be a professional engagement, limited to a specific context; it does not have to impinge upon the tutor's private life. Its content lies to a very large extent in the tutor's own hands, since it is the tutor's own expertise that is to be passed on to the student. It cannot be said to the tutor, as it can to the student, that participation in a particular activity is for his or her own good. That is not why the tutor is there. The enterprise is for the student's good, an altruistic activity in which the tutor has voluntarily undertaken to take part.

One could put this another way by saying that, on the tutor's part, the norms of behaviour are largely set by the notion of professional responsibility, including the responsible use of power and the deliberate sharing of knowledge in a way that respects the other. The tutor's commitment to the course is a professional one; there would have to be extraordinary, overriding reasons to warrant opting out of such an obligation freely entered into. On the student's part, on the other hand, the key concepts are trust and evaluation; enrolment on a course entails an element of surrender to the judgement of others, yet this is constantly checked, retrospectively, by an ongoing process of evaluation. The student's commitment to the course is necessarily provisional, conditional upon satisfactory answers being given to questions like 'Am I getting what I want out of this?' The student is, therefore, not without power, but it is of a different sort from that of the tutor. It is the power of the client to take custom elsewhere, not the institutional legitimacy enjoyed by the tutor.

Second, we should observe that the balance of power in the real world of social relationships may be very different from that predicted by an analysis of the formal role relationships. Those who occupy the most powerful positions do not necessarily have everything under control. On the contrary, they may feel trapped, with very little room for manoeuvre. So while we may say, formally speaking, that the tutor carries responsibility for managing the interaction with the student, we must recognize that, in practice, it may be the student who takes the initiative. Sometimes students will effectively run their own tutorial, may indeed run rings round the tutor. It is even possible that, in the course of what is ostensibly a tutorial conducted by the tutor for the benefit of the student, the student might give the tutor some valuable advice, in much the same way as he or she might occasionally teach the tutor a thing or two.

Of course, students, too, may misuse their power. It is not only tutors who may harass students; students may harass tutors. It needs to be said that students can sometimes be disturbingly manipulative in their dealings with their tutors.

Third, then, is it possible to distinguish different kinds of power? Given that the tutor's power is legitimately, even if not always effectively exercised, where does it get its legitimacy from? What bestows power in this context is not just the recognition from the outset on the part of the student that the tutor is a potential examiner; it is that the tutor is on the inside of the institution in a way that the student is not. The tutor's involvement in the management of the institution and its procedures, however uninterested he or she may actually be in these matters, necessarily skews the relationship and renders it asymmetrical.

Like Stanley Milgram's white-coated experimenters (1974), tutors operate within a social framework in which there is an in-built presumption that they know what they are up to. They may not actually be able to get away with murder, but they undoubtedly derive considerable power from their official position. Tutors sometimes show little awareness of this, and are inclined to play it down, encouraging the use of first names and other signs of informality. However, students are rarely fooled by this into thinking of the relationship as an equal one, for they know that in the last resort the tutor could have a great deal of influence on their future. What they seek is not a pretended renunciation of power, but its responsible exercise on their behalf.

In view of what has been said, how do tutor and student go about coming to terms with each other within an institutional context which, as we have seen, puts them on an unequal footing? For both parties it would be very easy to slip into a relationship which was in some way exploitative, which took unfair advantage of the tutor's position vis-à-vis the student, or in which, more simply, the student relinquished responsibility to the tutor. Tutors need to be clear that, even when there are matters on which they have to insist, such as the meeting of course requirements, there must always be room for the student to make his or her own decision, and to take the consequences for good or ill.

Students in higher education are legally adults and, therefore, the normal assumption must be that they are capable of taking charge of their own lives. Where, exceptionally, their ability to do this has broken down, any interference by others will be by agreement, as temporary as possible, and minimal. It will be designed to get the student back on his or her own feet, functioning independently. This general principle applies to all helping, but it is particularly important where the helper is in a position of authority or influence, or where other factors may intrude upon the situation so that one cannot be sure whether the take-up of offers of help is genuinely voluntary.

It may now be clear why it is necessary to claim not only that the tutorial relationship is an asymmetrical one, in that there is more power on one side than on the other, but that it is *inherently* asymmetrical. The way tutor and student relate in a teaching/learning setting governs the way they relate in

other situations within the institutional context. Thus, the inequality of the tutor–student *helping* relationship is intrinsic to the tutor–student *teaching* relationship, and analogous to it. The problem for the tutor is much the same in each case; it is to exercise power responsibly and professionally, to help without helping too much. Those reputed to be the best teachers may actually leave least room for the student to discover anything for themselves; similarly, the tutors who appear most concerned and conscientious may be so quick to anticipate the student’s needs that they provide help before the student has had time to ask for it or realized the need for it. Both may be a misuse of the tutor’s superior power in this situation. Just as one should avoid spoon-feeding in teaching so one should avoid dependency in support and for much the same reason.

The paradox of helping

In any helping relationship there is always the problem of overdoing it. To help too much is, paradoxically, *unhelpful*. That there is a danger of inducing helplessness cannot be denied. Martin Seligman (1975), in his book *Helplessness*, develops an ambitious theory about the ways in which people may learn to be helpless. He offers his theory as an explanation of a range of very different things: slow development in childhood learning, the institutionalization of old people, states of mental depression and the high mortality rate of men whose wives have recently died. All of these may be interpreted as forms of ‘learned helplessness’. It would seem a small step to add to this list students who, once given a great deal of support, seem subsequently to be unable to manage without this help and become chronically dependent upon their tutor. Could this be another manifestation of the same phenomenon?

In view of what is sometimes made of the idea of a ‘dependency culture’ as a reason for dismantling welfare provision, one should be wary of drawing general conclusions from quite limited evidence in other areas. Yet there is no reason to deny that the provision of well-intentioned help can reduce the motivation to help oneself. It is certainly possible that tutors sometimes inadvertently encourage an unhealthy dependency in students who are already somewhat insecure. However, it may not be the sheer *amount* of help which is experienced as disabling but rather the *kind* of help and the *way* it is given.

An over-dependent, clinging relationship creates problems of its own and is difficult to terminate without damage. But who is clinging to whom? Busy tutors, conscious of the needs of their other students as well as all their other responsibilities, may still find themselves devoting an excessive amount of time and attention to one student. This has to be seen not simply as the student’s problem (e.g. socially insecure, struggling with the course), nor as the tutor’s problem (e.g. pathologically lonely, eager to feel needed), but rather as a problem of the relationship and how it has developed. That said, it must still be reasserted that the tutor has to take responsibility for managing

the relationship. The tutor has the difficult and perhaps paradoxical task of assuming most of the responsibility for ensuring that the relationship is not one in which the tutor dominates the student; or, for that matter, one in which the student dominates the tutor.

Occasionally students may pester a tutor for help and support, or perhaps, more subtly, find ways of manipulating the tutor into giving an inordinate amount of time to them. It might appear that for the student to manipulate the tutor was simply the opposite case of the tutor exploiting the student, control having effectively passed out of the tutor's hands and into the hands of the student. Yet a more careful analysis might reveal that the manipulation was another form of dependency; that for the student to try to manipulate the tutor was a sign of weakness not strength. The student is more likely to be wanting to cling than to dominate. The relationship has become so personally important that the student dare not let go, and is constantly manoeuvring the tutor into a helping position for fear that the tutor will not otherwise be available.

Yet there is something of a paradox here too. For when the relationship has become one in which the tutor is virtually on the end of a string, at the student's beck and call, this does not satisfy, for what the student really wants is a voluntary relationship. Constantly asking for help creates a situation in which help is only given in response to demand and can hardly ever be freely offered.

By looking briefly at some of the ways in which helping relationships can become dysfunctional it has been possible to show that helping is a paradoxical activity. So, of course, is teaching. As already pointed out, tutors in higher education normally discourage students from becoming over-dependent for basically the same reason that they resist spoon-feeding in teaching; because in both causes to overdo it is ultimately self-defeating.

This discussion has shown up more than just the unequal status of tutor and student. It has revealed the extent of the tutor's responsibility for managing the helping process and how the tutor's power lies in being on the inside of this process in a way that the student is not. It has also exposed a fundamental principle of helping, that most people most of the time are perfectly capable of helping themselves once their situation can be viewed objectively, and that to provide this objectivity is often the best way, sometimes the only way, they can be helped without being in some way diminished.

Thus, ideally we might think of the tutor who helps a student not so much as a helping agent, but rather as instrumental in facilitating the helping process. It is not that the tutor brings to the encounter a superior wisdom with which to solve the student's problems, but rather that the tutor, by virtue of the role occupied, the human qualities shown and the professional skills deployed, enables the helping process to occur.

There are, indeed, skills which individuals possess or may acquire so as to be more effective helpers. Yet tutoring is not reducible to a set of skills, still

less to knowing about interpersonal behaviour. The fact is that tutors are professionally required to be supportive and helpful to students, without necessarily sharing or even fully understanding their point of view. What matters is not whether they know about empathy, only whether they show it.

The trouble is that we can all behave considerately and humanely when we are not too busy, when we are feeling in a good mood, relaxed and unhurried, when the student is someone we know and like, when we are on a 'safe' subject, etc. In such circumstances it is not too difficult to respond to students' needs calmly, thoughtfully and sensitively. However, often it is not like this. Students may ask awkward questions, introduce a very different perspective with which we have very little sympathy or patience; they may surprise us, shock us, or in some way 'put us on the spot' or challenge us, perhaps quite unintentionally; worse still, they may disagree with us, or actually complain to us about something, or perhaps unwittingly touch on what is, for us, a rather sensitive area. On these occasions we may find ourselves responding defensively. In addition to skill, therefore, we need qualities which have traditionally been defined as 'moral': patience, respect for the other, a willingness to put the other's interests above our own, altruism, caring. The tutorial relationship, like any other relationship, works best when these qualities are dependably present; without them it may all too easily lapse into some form of exploitation, manipulation, dependency or harassment.

7

Confidentiality

As the previous chapter was concerned to show, a good working relationship between tutor and student depends not on intimacy, but on mutual respect and trust, providing a secure framework within which both can get on with their respective tasks of teaching and learning. It is a mistake to suppose that discussion of more personal matters, possibly of a confidential nature, presupposes a relationship that is closer, warmer or more intimate. An effective tutorial relationship will not be a cosy one. On the contrary, if it is to allow and even perhaps facilitate the offer of criticism and its acceptance, it is essential that the relationship is straightforward and businesslike, and is characterized by frankness and mutual respect. The crucial factors are the tutor's reliability and consistency in providing a safe and supportive relationship.

Dealing with sensitive information

One might think that the problem of confidentiality had more to do with the difficulty of keeping other people's secrets than with not knowing what one should do with them; the actual *idea* of confidentiality might seem relatively unproblematic. However, as consideration of a couple of examples will quickly show, a tutor may find that in practice it is extremely difficult to know how to handle sensitive information about students. Suppose a tutor asks a student about his poor attendance at a Thursday class, and gets the reply 'Well, as a matter of fact I haven't been coming to *any* of the classes on Thursdays. I have a part-time job that clashes with that part of the programme, and I can't afford to give it up.'

Here is a case where there might be a difference of opinion as to how the tutor should react. It depends to some extent upon the course and the context. Many courses have a formal attendance requirement and in this case the student is not only failing to meet that requirement, but is stating that he has no intention of meeting it. If the student is in receipt of a grant on the understanding that he is a full-time student, the grant-awarding authority

wants to know that the student is, in fact, following the course full-time as prescribed, and is entitled to be told of any failure to meet course requirements. Yet few tutors would immediately inform the grant-awarding authority that this student was not meeting course requirements. Many would, on the contrary, have a good deal of sympathy for a student who was trying to hold down a part-time job and, in spite of this disadvantage, intended to fulfil exactly the same coursework commitments and to pass the same end-of-course examinations as other students. The student might have hoped that persistent absence on Thursdays would go unnoticed. Yet, once it is revealed to the tutor, what is an appropriate response?

Much depends upon whether the student is, in fact, infringing any formal regulation; this a technical matter. Some tutors (and courses and institutions) take the view that in higher education it is up to the student as to how regularly he or she attends lectures and classes. With recent moves to permit more flexible modes of attendance and towards competency-based assessment in which learning outcomes are more important than the processes by which the learning has taken place, it might seem particularly inappropriate at the present time to penalize a student who might be both able and conscientious for no other reason than that one part of the course has been missed. This student has, after all, been honest about the situation. When challenged, the student could easily have simply promised to attend more regularly; instead, the full story has been frankly revealed. How many more students are there, perhaps following the same course, who are holding down part-time jobs without ever revealing the fact to their tutors because they do not want to jeopardize their status as full-time students?

Yet perhaps the section of the course missed was part of the compulsory core of the course? Possibly attendance has been made a course requirement not for some formal or bureaucratic reason, but because the course being followed does, in fact, depend crucially upon full participation? What if it is a course of professional training which has no final examination, but in which the experience of practical exercises is absolutely essential to the course as a whole?

Enough has been said to show that in this case, the question for the tutor of how to handle the information the student has volunteered is not a straightforward one.

Here is another example. A married woman is deserted by her husband immediately prior to her first year examinations. She informs her Course Tutor of her circumstances, but insists that she wants to carry on as if nothing has happened. She is anxious that none of the other students should know about it. 'I think I can cope with the exams', she says, 'but I don't think I can cope with other people knowing.'

How might the tutor respond to this request? It seems perfectly reasonable and one would hope that in such circumstances most tutors would feel able to give her the reassurance that she seeks. Unlike the previous example where the demands of the part-time job conflicted directly with the requirements of the course, in this example the information has strictly speaking no bearing

upon the course as such. The state of a student's marriage, domestic arrangements or family relationships is an entirely private matter which does not normally need to concern a Course Tutor. This student is under no obligation to tell anybody about her private affairs.

So why has she done so? The most obvious explanation is that, in spite of her resolve to carry on as normal, she fears that she may not manage this, so she wants the Course Tutor to speak up for her in the Examination Board. This seems very sensible of her and is surely a reasonable request? However, there are some further considerations involved. The Examination Board can hardly take into account mitigating circumstances unless it knows what those circumstances are. Is she willing that the Examination Board be told? Can the Course Tutor guarantee that information given to the Examination Board will not, in due course, reach her fellow-students? When dealing with a distraught student on the eve of her examinations many tutors would unhesitatingly accede to her request, anxious to put her mind at rest, promising that the personal information she had given them would be revealed to no one. Later, after she had, say, performed very badly in some of the examinations or perhaps failed to attend for one of them, the tutor might regret having given such an unequivocal promise of secrecy.

On the other hand, the Course Tutor might have explored the issues with the student a little further. For instance, is this information which is to be passed to the Examination Board as a matter of course, on the understanding that it is confidential? Or is it, on the other hand, information which is only to be passed to the Examination Board if necessary, i.e. if she is in danger of failing the course? The latter situation is sometimes formalized by a procedure whereby the student provides the Board with a letter in a sealed envelope, only to be opened in case of failure. However, this procedure is not universally adopted, and the student may have to choose between either keeping the information confidential, in which case it cannot be taken into consideration, or asking for it to be taken into consideration, in which case it must be revealed.¹ Revealed to whom, though? Sometimes a small sub-group of the Examination Board will vet confidential disclosures. The precise details of these procedures could make a crucial difference to how a case might be handled. In this particular instance there may be a further consideration. Under the immediate impact of such a domestic crisis the point may not be that nobody else must *ever* know, but rather that the student would find it difficult if it became known in the immediate future. The student's request might be interpreted as 'Please don't tell anyone *just yet*'. Again, this needs to be clarified.

A cynical view might be that the student wants, in effect, to take out an 'insurance policy'. One can hardly blame her for trying; to ask that confidentiality be preserved intact while at the same time offering an excuse for a possibly below-par performance is, in effect, an insurance that costs nothing. Some tutors might justifiably point out that, if special consideration is to be given to a student and especially if a lower standard of work is to be accepted or condoned, it is reasonable to insist that there is some

publicly-available evidence; more must be required than telling one's tutor privately. In the case of medical conditions which are offered as 'mitigating circumstances' it is usual to insist on evidence in the form of a medical certificate from a doctor. What would be the appropriate 'proof' in this case? Or are there occasions when a student's own word may be accepted as proof enough without any independent verification? In this example, it is hardly the sort of story which a student would invent, yet students *do* invent stories, and those who are the guardians of standards are right to want to check.

Consideration of these two examples brings out some of the complexities here. What is quite apparent is that one cannot simply distinguish between two sorts of information: that which may be spoken about and that which may not. Confidentiality cannot be sensibly conceived as a kind of 'news blackout'. There is real difficulty in the notion that if something is confidential then absolutely no one should be told. It is not as if there were a two-way switch which could be either 'on' or 'off' when one is listening to the various things a student may say; rather, there is a sliding scale, ranging from ordinary information on which there need be no embargo and which can be spoken of openly, to matters which have to be kept hidden and even actively concealed because rightly or wrongly one party regards them as 'top secret'. Clearly, this is an area in which a great deal of discretion has to be exercised and in which careful judgements have to be made.

A private conversation between two people might be regarded by both as 'off-the-record' and not normally to be relayed to anyone else without the other's permission. Yet there are special circumstances surrounding the tutorial encounter where a student and a member of teaching staff have a private conversation: confidences are likely to be passed from the student to the tutor and not vice versa; the student is, therefore, in a specially vulnerable position. Because most tutors are well aware of that they are often very strict with themselves where confidentiality is concerned. Yet confidentiality is not the same as secrecy and does not lend itself to the rigid application of a rule; rather, a great deal of discretion has to be exercised. The tutor who tries to safeguard the best interests of the student may perhaps find that they conflict with the student's stated wishes. Moreover, as we have seen already, the role of tutor is not simply that of advocate; teaching staff have a wide range of responsibilities, of which upholding the interests of the individual student is only one.

Privacy, secrecy and confidentiality

It helps to distinguish between the concepts of privacy, secrecy and confidentiality. Although the terms are sometimes used very loosely, even interchangeably, their meanings are slightly different.

Privacy has to do with the circumstances or the context of the tutorial relationship. Tutors may be able to offer students very little privacy if by that

is meant a guarantee that they are seen individually and may speak without being overheard or interrupted. The central idea of 'privacy' is that of being 'set apart' or 'put on one side'. It is the seclusion of the setting, rather than the intimacy of the relationship or the sensitivity of the information, that is signalled by the use of the word 'private'.

Secrecy has more to do with the actual material that passes from one to another, as to whether it should be 'classified' information or not. Within the context of a private conversation, certain bits of information may be considered secrets, not to be disclosed. The root meaning of 'secret' is 'sifted', i.e. discerned or distinguished as different and, therefore, to be kept separate. As classified information, a secret is not just kept separate, it is kept concealed; it therefore carries the suggestion of being somewhat mysterious, legitimately arousing some curiosity. Material that is secret has restricted circulation confined to those who are 'in the know', effectively excluding others. Thus, while privacy is primarily about avoidance of publicity, secrecy is about the avoidance of disclosure. If something is private it is removed from the public domain; if it is secret it is hidden from view.

Confidentiality is perhaps more complicated than either privacy or secrecy, since it is centrally concerned with the actual relationship between the two parties; not with the environmental conditions (which will often though not necessarily be private) nor with the material that passes from one to the other (which will often though not necessarily be secret), but with the trusting nature of the relationship. The basic idea is that of being able to trust the other. It suggests a relationship in which one person regards the other as trustworthy and is willing to entrust him or her with things that are not being entrusted to others. Confidentiality indicates a privileged relationship in the literal sense that it has its own rules; normal rules do not apply. A relationship of this sort is characterized by integrity and respect; it is one that can be relied on with complete assurance. There is a commitment to the other which means that whatever is passed on will be kept safe.

In the light of this analysis, then, we may say that an individual tutorial may sometimes be a private conversation; that within this private conversation it is possible that the student might reveal some secret information; and that it is expected that tutors in whom students have confidence will sometimes be entrusted with information on the understanding that they will keep it safe. Thus, there are basically three different things here and it helps if they are not confused.

Our concern here is with confidentiality. Unlike privacy, it is not easy to recognize whether or when the appropriate conditions are being met. Unlike secrecy, it is not something which operates at certain times and not at others, or in relation to certain categories of material and not to the rest. There may, perhaps, be degrees of privacy, and degrees of secrecy; there are certainly degrees of confidentiality. How might we characterize them? Are there perhaps a number of different variables involved? In the proposed model that follows, five dimensions of confidentiality are identified: levels of sensitivity, of seriousness, of relevance, of permission and of disclosure.

Confidentiality: a five-dimensional model

First, there are *levels of sensitivity of information*. For instance, in normal circumstances it would not occur to most students to think of their name and address as confidential information, though one could imagine a situation where even these basic facts about a person could become extremely sensitive – e.g. if the student is being pursued by a debt-collecting agency or by a jilted lover. By contrast, a person's sexual orientation would be generally regarded as highly sensitive information, and not at all the sort of thing to be divulged to anyone else. Between these two extremes lie matters such as one's age, marital status, academic qualifications and health record. Sensitivity, however, is a very subjective affair; some students may be very sensitive about their age; others about an unusual middle name. Different people want different things kept confidential in different contexts.

So we have to indicate a second, more objective distinction between *matters which are serious in their effects and those which are relatively trivial*. Facts about a student's past may have very little significance ('she once lived in Bolton') or may be potentially very damaging if revealed ('he was once on heroin'). A student's financial difficulties may have far-reaching consequences including forced withdrawal from the course; but other matters which are felt to be serious by the student and about which the student is extremely sensitive (e.g. going bald) may be of no consequence whatsoever.

Third, there is the question of *how far these pieces of information might have a bearing on the student's work*. There are certain facts, such as a student's previous experience and qualifications, which for a student on a vocational course can hardly be treated as confidential. For part-time students on courses paid for by their employers their current job may be an important part of the total experience. For students on sandwich courses their placement may be of central significance. So these are not by any stretch of the imagination irrelevant facts about a student which might be kept quite separate from the course itself. The tutor may wish to refer to the workplace experience, or encourage the student to illustrate the application of some theory. It is possible, then, to imagine another sliding scale, running from information about the student that may be regarded as a purely personal matter and in which tutors have no strictly professional interest since it is *irrelevant* to the course (e.g. their marital status, their hobbies, their political commitments), through information that may be *indirectly relevant* to the course (e.g. their inability to concentrate following a family bereavement), to information that is *directly relevant* to the course (e.g. their coursework marks, their entry qualifications, etc.). It is worth noting that even in the latter case this is private information, not to be spoken of freely without the student's agreement. It is also worth noting that for certain courses a physical disability might be directly relevant to student's ability to continue the course. Clearly, a tutor needs a great deal of tact and discretion not simply in deciding whether these matters are appropriate to mention, but precisely when, how and to whom.

Fourth, there is *the extent to which the student gives permission* for information to be revealed. This might seem a little odd; surely, the student either does give permission or does not? In fact, of course, it is not like that. One experiences the full range of attitudes, from ‘If you tell anyone I’ll kill you’ to a specific request: ‘I would be grateful if you would tell the other students; it will come better from you.’ It is not often that a student swears a member of staff to secrecy. More often, the student reveals some information first and only subsequently (perhaps prompted by the tutor?) considers the question of how confidential it is, and who else, if anybody, should be told. Students sometimes say they don’t mind if you tell X, but please don’t tell Y. Or they may say that they know the information will leak out eventually, but they don’t want anyone to know just yet. Quite often what a student says is at odds with what he or she seems to want; for instance, the student may feign nonchalance or apathy and say ‘I don’t care who you tell’, which barely disguises quite strong feelings that it is none of anyone else’s business.

This analysis would not be complete without identifying a fifth variable: *different levels of disclosure*. It is not often noticed that there are many different ways in which the recipient of confidential information can handle it. One response is simply to say ‘My lips are sealed.’ This appears to offer a very strong form of secrecy which may sometimes be quite hard to maintain, i.e. that even under close questioning from a trusted colleague the tutor will give away nothing – not even the fact that he or she is privy to some information which could conceivably shed light on the student’s performance. Many tutors would feel that little harm could come (and perhaps some good be done) by revealing to colleagues that there are more facts available about a particular student, and that they are aware of some of them even if they are unable to divulge them. Sometimes the burden of others’ confidences is quite hard to bear and it may help to share the burden with someone who is quite outside the situation, telling the story, but without mentioning the student’s name. More commonly still, having given the student the assurance that what they have told you will go no further, the tutor realizes that it is very much in the student’s interest that one or more colleagues should be alerted to the situation. Clearly, this should not happen; the student’s permission should be sought first. Yet the motive here is very much to safeguard the student’s interests, and it is not at all the same as disclosing confidential information inadvertently, for no other reason but one’s own carelessness. Worse still is deliberate and indiscriminate broadcasting of confidential information, orally or (worst of all) in writing.

Professional responsibility

Like many other professional people, teachers in higher education cannot do their job well without knowing a good deal about those they teach, more than just information about their previous attainments in the subject. Within a good teacher–student relationship it is inevitable that other matters will come

to light, such as illness or difficult domestic circumstances, and not always because they have some bearing on the student's work. These items of information will not have been sought out, nor perhaps deliberately 'confided'. There may have been no opportunity to negotiate the terms on which the information was passed on. It can happen, say, that two separate pieces of information reach the tutor from different sources; it may be the merest coincidence; yet once in possession of these two facts the tutor cannot help putting them together and drawing a conclusion. Neither of the informants knows what the tutor knows or that the tutor has this knowledge, so the question of gaining their consent cannot apply.

How does a professional person deal with this sort of information? There is really no simple answer except to say that it has to be handled with discretion, i.e. keeping things in separate compartments. It is a matter of judgement, the kind of judgement of which professional people are deemed capable and with which they are entrusted.

Tutors have tended to look to other professions to see how they handle matters of confidentiality; in particular, the influential ideas of pastoral care and of counselling have suggested that the priest's confessional or the counsellor's consultation might serve as an appropriate model.² However, the tutor operates very differently from either, often dealing with more than one 'client' at once. Also, it is often not realized that the priest who hears confessions will also go to confession himself or that the counselling profession has developed strict rules about 'supervision', the point being that it is simply unprofessional to attempt to carry the burden of others' secrets on the basis that one serves as the place where the buck stops and where information is simply collected. The attempt to operate as blotting paper, single-handedly soaking up other people's troubles, is misguided, even dangerous, and one is entitled to be suspicious of anyone who offers that service, to ask questions about their motivation and, indeed, their mental health. Chaplains and counsellors operating professionally within higher education institutions are reluctant to act as a kind of sump to the whole system and will seek to operate more like a safe pair of hands within a safe system, i.e. one on which one can rely because there is mutual trust enabling private and confidential information to be handled sensibly and sensitively. This seems a better model for tutors, too.

The relationship between student and tutor may be quite personal, but is not exclusive. Within an institution of higher education students may establish relationships with several members of staff, some of whom work together; so there is quite likely to be a network of relationships. In such a context, it may not be helpful to think of confidentiality simply in terms of the one-to-one relationship, or to apply rules of procedure which have been developed by counsellors, psychotherapists or chaplains. A more helpful model might be that of the social worker who, while having an individual case-load, often works closely with colleagues. In the social work context, the case-conference, where a number of professionals share information about a particular case, is now quite common. When case-loads are adjusted or when

members of the team leave and are replaced, there are relatively straightforward procedures for briefing one's colleagues and passing over the relevant file of information. Nor is it simply a matter of determining formal procedures, but rather of creating an institutional climate in which both the sharing and the withholding of information may be done appropriately.

The teaching profession has generally been much less good at dealing with sensitive information. Within higher education it is not unknown for confidential information to become common knowledge; equally, there are occasions (notably in examination boards) when secrecy is perhaps taken too far. While teachers in higher education routinely pass each other information about students' marks and grades, they are very wary of sharing more personal information. There is, indeed, a real difficulty for tutors who are responsible both for helping students and assessing them. However, the problems are not insuperable; it is better described as role strain than role conflict. There are ways of acting responsibly and professionally, and it is a mistake for staff in higher education to think that they are caught on the horns of a hopeless dilemma.

This chapter has been concerned to show the complexity of the idea of confidentiality, to distinguish it from simpler notions of keeping secrets, to unpack some of the variables involved, and to put the concept in the context of professional responsibility. Of course, the ground rules should be as clear as possible, yet in the end there are bound to be difficult cases where one has to make a judgement about what is best to do. The key to confidentiality, it is suggested, is trust. It has more to do with the quality of the relationship than the nature of the material confided or the fact that others are excluded.

Tutors may feel that to possess confidential information about a student imposes an intolerable burden and, especially if unsure of how to react, be glad of an opportunity to share it with someone else who can be trusted. This serves two purposes: it acts as a safety-valve and it widens the range of expertise available to the student. It is a mistake to regard this as a reprehensible breach of confidentiality; on the contrary, it is responsible professional behaviour. Of course, it is advisable to find one's own support outside the immediate situation and to consult someone who is not personally involved, not least because they may be able to see things in a more detached way. In a sensible professional context staff should not feel they have to offer support to students while feeling unsupported themselves. It ought to be possible for a tutor to involve colleagues and especially to be able to refer students to others who can offer specialist help when required. The next chapter addresses the question of the limits of the tutor's role, and the point at which referral may be appropriate and advisable.

Notes

1. The situation here is somewhat different from, say, an application for financial assistance, where there might be no need for anyone other than the student adviser or personal tutor to know the full details of the student's circumstances and where it might be enough for the member of staff simply to vouch for the fact that the necessary conditions (e.g. of hardship) were met. However, awarding a qualification is not like helping someone out of a hole. An academic award becomes a lifelong possession affecting job opportunities, social status and long-term career prospects. Something which confers public recognition in this way requires a criteria be met publicly.
2. A recent article (Phillips, 1991) exposes, with unusual frankness, the uncertainty which, even for professional counsellors, often surrounds this issue.

8

The Tutor's Role

If students are required to explain why they have not completed course requirements they are bound to reveal some details of their personal circumstances. So even a tutor who does not find this part of the job particularly enjoyable or rewarding and who is reluctant to get involved in students' personal lives, nonetheless, finds it impossible not to do so. Yet, interestingly, even when tutors feel overburdened with students' problems they rarely react with criticism of the students ('they should learn to stand on their own two feet'), but nearly always with self-criticism ('perhaps I should draw the line at this'). Thus, tutors are constantly blaming themselves for not drawing a clear enough line between academic assistance and personal support, or for not drawing it firmly enough, or for not drawing it in the right place. All this suggests that the boundaries of the role need to be marked out much more clearly.

Front-line support

The value of the help and support which tutors give students is rarely spelt out. What is their distinctive contribution, and how does it relate to the other supports available? The image is sometimes used of tutors acting as the 'front-line' of student support, with other more specialized supports available and waiting in the wings ready to become involved if necessary. Before we can see whether this picture makes any sense or not, let us consider just what can usefully be done by a tutor who has no special training in counselling or in social work, but who wants to be helpful to his or her students.

One might suggest as a minimum requirement that tutors should be willing to listen carefully to what their students care to tell them about themselves. Those who lack specialist training often have no idea how useful it can be to simply offer a listening ear. They sometimes allow themselves to feel de-skilled by the fact that there are others with special skills in these areas. It is, therefore, worth noting just how much help can be given simply by allowing someone to talk and offering them your attention. If nothing more were asked of teaching staff than that they be prepared to listen to

students who chose to speak to them (no special availability, no insistence on approachability, no special training given, no skills presupposed) a great deal of help and support would thereby be offered to students. Often this is all that the student requires to find his or her own way of dealing with some problem.

Tutors need not only to appreciate just how helpful attentive listening can be, but also to know when it is unlikely to be enough. If problems go back a long way; if the student cannot articulate the problem; if the student cannot express his or her feelings adequately or appropriately; if the student blames everyone else and is unwilling to make any personal change; if the student is expecting someone else to decide the matter, or wave a wand to put it right; if the student appears to have problems in virtually every department of life; if the student either resists help or quickly comes to rely on it; if the student is isolated from others, or behaves oddly, unpredictably, or dangerously: then in all these cases tutors should probably consider involving someone else.

The investigation referred to in Chapter 5 found teaching staff dealing with a surprising number of students with quite severe difficulties. This is disturbing evidence, not only because some of these students may have needed specialist help, but because it imposes an unnecessary strain on tutors who have other things to do. Tutors need to have a fairly clear conception of their role so that they can set limits to their involvement; otherwise, as already argued in Chapter 5, they can experience student support not as a fulfilling part of their teaching role, but as a kind of bottomless pit into which they feel sucked, which takes them away from other legitimate professional concerns, and which skews and distorts their professional role. Yet the fact remains that the help and support that students need can often be provided by their tutors simply giving them their time and attention.

Roles and relationships

What is offered in a tutorial, I have been suggesting, is a relationship. From this point of view, there is no fundamental difference between an 'academic' tutorial and a 'personal' tutorial. A member of teaching staff in an institution of higher education carries responsibilities for providing both kinds of help and support, and does so most effectively by relating to the student personally. In this respect tutoring differs from both interviewing and counselling.

Interviewing is a matter of skilled performance, of putting the other at ease, of allowing the interviewee a certain amount of rope, of focused questioning and of timing; it does not offer much in the way of a relationship. Indeed, a relationship with the interviewee might be thought to get in the way of the functional task that has to be done; in job interviews interviewers may withdraw from the interviewing role if it is felt that their relationship with the interviewee could compromise their objectivity.

Counselling, in a rather different way, eschews relationships. It has long been recognized that transference can take place within a psychotherapeutic

relationship. Opinions among counsellors differ as to whether this kind of situation should be avoided or used creatively, but the canons of professional behaviour tend to discourage personal relationships between counsellor and client. Counselling is sometimes described as simply offering the client a 'mirror', a process of reflecting back to the client almost mechanically; others would more readily accept that counselling offers the client a personal relationship. The fact remains, however, that counselling theory has difficulty with the idea of a relationship between counsellor and client. Counsellors often take refuge in the distinction between a personal and a professional relationship; the latter is intrinsic to the counselling process, the former is to be avoided or at least discouraged. Tutors may take refuge in the same way, yet perhaps with less justification.

The word 'role' is important here. What distinguishes a member of teaching staff from, say, a counsellor is not that the latter has specific training (some academics may indeed have training in counselling) or deals with more serious or persistent problems (though that also may be true); it is that the two roles are different.

To show this, it is only necessary to consider what is involved in going to see someone you do not normally meet: the encounter immediately becomes a 'consultation' in which the stakes are considerably raised. While a student may be able to chat to his or her tutor quite casually, and in the course of such a conversation may raise and explore a matter of some personal importance, there are many opportunities for retreat on both sides. The problem can be broached obliquely, mentioned casually, even just hinted at, to see whether the tutor is observant enough to notice, willing to pick it up, concerned to try to help. If the tutor approached handles the matter clumsily, makes too much of it, or is overinterested, it will be relatively easy for the student not to pursue the matter. Similarly, the tutor, in asking for an explanation why a piece of work has not been completed on time, may stumble on some personal problem. In these kinds of encounter, precisely because they are ill-defined, both parties have escape-routes; it may turn into a quasi-counselling session or it may not, but at least in principle either tutor or student by opting out of the discussion at any point can ensure that it does not.

It needs to be said that academics are not there primarily for this. However important we think student support to be, and however much we would like it to be closely integrated into the teaching role, it remains a secondary function. Teaching staff are primarily there to teach; their role certainly includes helping and supporting students, but it includes much else besides. In this respect they are unlike professional support staff, for whom support is the central focus of their role, and who usually have no other function within the institution but to help and support students.

Equally, students are not there primarily for this either. Higher education institutions are not therapeutic communities; they want to be able to take certain things for granted (students' health and general well-being) in order to get on with other things, such as the students' education. Sometimes the relationship between the two is very close, so that it is almost impossible to

distinguish them; but often students present 'problems' the resolving of which is a prerequisite for their studies to continue rather than being itself a part of their education.

When you are 'not yourself', 'going to pieces', or in some other way diminished, less than whole, it helps to go and talk to a stranger, someone you hardly know, someone you may not normally meet, someone who is not involved in your troubles and who can respond as a whole person to you in your brokenness. This person may also have special skill in allowing you to be yourself, to speak your mind, to express your feelings. But that is not what tutors offer. An educational process, at its best, is an encounter between whole people; it is not therapy. It follows that the kind of relationship which a tutor may offer should not be seen as getting in the way of the professional task, but as an intrinsic part of it. Of course, the relationship may become complicated and there are judgements to be made about any close involvement, whether hostile or favourable to the other; but these are for reasons of professional propriety, not because the educational process is vitiated when there is personal involvement. On the contrary, relationships are the very stuff of the educational process.

Setting boundaries

Institutions may define the tutor's role differently and it may be more important that there are clearly understood boundaries than exactly where the boundaries are set. However, certain general principles can be identified here which, if borne in mind, serve at least to rule out certain styles of helping and supporting by teaching staff.

First, the student is an adult. Of course, he or she may be pathologically immature at any age and, consequently, in need of special support, yet as a general principle members of teaching staff ought to treat students as adults. Students have the right to be so treated, even if they do not behave in a consistently adult way. They have a right to make their own decisions and not to be pestered by staff trying to be helpful. Indeed, they have a right to be left alone even when apparently making a mess of things.

Second, tutors have a right to their own lives, their own privacy. It is not appropriate that teachers in higher education should be at the student's beck and call; this is not the professional role which higher education institutions employ tutors to fulfil. Indeed, that professional role requires a measure of detachment from the student's situation in order to offer the kind of help and support which *is* appropriate.

Third, colleagues have rights in this matter also. We are not entitled to involve other staff in what may turn out to be, in effect, a social work or counselling role, even if this is a role they want to adopt. This is another reason for caution and for careful limits to the role. Wherever the line is drawn, it must hold good for colleagues too. Any tutors who wish to go

beyond what is formally required need to be clear that this is what they are doing and to recognize that they cannot expect others to do the same. It is also important that professional support staff should be called in at an appropriate stage; delaying referral can put support staff in the difficult position of having to pick up problems at a point where they have become chronic and intractable.

Fourth, it is not just a question of 'rights', but of good practice. It is in the long-term interests of all involved to avoid, say, setting up a relationship of dependency, or getting into a situation in which the tutor is meeting his or her own needs through helping the student.

Fifth, any member of teaching staff who becomes heavily involved in supporting one or more students will need strong support him or herself. This is often not appreciated until too late. Where is this support to come from, and who will provide it? To face this question is to begin to answer the question of the limits of the tutor's role. The more deeply tutors become involved, the stronger their supports need to be; so the resources available for tutor support may serve to set limits on what tutors may safely undertake.

Sixth, there are matters of which most teaching staff have no knowledge or experience: legal issues, such as the threatened deportation of an overseas student, require legal advice; matters such as violence, crime or drug abuse, may have to involve the police; suspected mental illness probably needs to be referred to a doctor. Most tutors quickly become out of their depth on all these matters.

All of the above considerations have the effect of restraining tutors from becoming over-involved and suggest ways in which the role of tutor might be limited to more manageable proportions. There is no intention here to prescribe precisely how the role should best be carried out, but to make it more straightforward, less of a blank cheque. Because it has been ill-defined, the tutor's role has sometimes been too easily equated with some other role, for instance that of 'advocate', which has seemed to offer a clearer specification. However, the role of tutor does not necessarily require that one takes sides with the student against the institution, or against an Examination Board, though of course it might. It is a truism to say that the interests of the student are paramount, yet the fact remains that tutors have responsibilities to the other students, to their institution, to their profession, to their discipline, to themselves and their own integrity. The role of tutor is *sui generis*, not to be defined in terms of one or more other roles.

It will be argued in Part 3 that two models in particular, pastoral care and counselling, have had a powerful influence on the tutor's role and how it has been conceived, and that the contradictions between them have contributed to current confusion about the tutor's role. It should also be noted, however, that in certain respects these models have pulled in the same direction in that they have jointly had the effect of opening up the role and raising expectations of what tutors might do for students.

What is important is to establish a more realistic conception of the role that tutors might reasonably be expected to fulfil. It is necessary to insist that

it is above all a *professional* role which, however defined in particular contexts, has a territory of its own. It does not allow, still less encourage, amateurish dabbling in a range of other professional roles such as counsellor, social worker or pastor. Clarification of the role benefits all concerned, but especially perhaps tutors themselves who often feel uncertain of what is expected of them. Like anyone asked to fulfil an ill-defined role, tutors sometimes get into very deep water because they do not know where to stop or where to draw the line; alternatively, fearful of not knowing where to stop, they are over-cautious and reluctant to get involved with students at all. Both these states of affairs are seen as symptoms of an underlying confusion about the role and about where to set its boundaries.

Referral

One way to clarify this further is to consider when and how tutors should pass students on to someone else for help and support. What might seem a relatively straightforward matter becomes, on closer inspection, something of a minefield. A tutor who feels out of his or her depth will no doubt be relieved to be able to hand over responsibility for the student to someone else; but how will the student feel? What may be done sincerely in the interests of the student and to ensure that the student is given the support he or she needs may be experienced as precisely the opposite – withdrawal of support just when it was most needed. Is the student being ‘fobbed off’ onto someone else as a way of shifting responsibility, passing the buck, or allowing the tutor to wash his or her hands of the matter? Or is the tutor admitting to some personal inadequacy? The student is entitled to know why it is thought necessary to go and see someone else, to tell the story all over again, and (apparently, at least) to delay still further the solution of the problems. If the tutorial relationship is as important as has been suggested there will need to be very strong reasons for setting it aside in favour of some other arrangement.

Anyone with a tutorial responsibility needs to have a clear idea of their own personal limits. What is the territory on which they feel ‘at home’? This will indicate areas of competence which they know they can handle readily, because they have been prepared by their experience, qualifications, skills and interests. For most tutors this will include matters concerning their own professional role, their own specialism, the courses they teach, advice on study skills and a certain rather narrow range of career options with which they are familiar.

There will be other areas on which they feel less secure, more uneasy, and a few where they feel unable to cope at all. This may be because they lack relevant experience or because the personal impact of their experience has been such as to make it impossible for them to respond to students in similar circumstances in a dispassionate or disinterested way. Examples might be the

experience of a broken relationship, bereavement or termination of pregnancy. It is perfectly understandable if some tutors feel that experiences of this sort effectively disqualify them from dealing with such matters, at least until they have personally come to terms with them more satisfactorily. Whereas trained counsellors can be expected to have worked through their own personal experiences, the same cannot be asked of tutors, only that they should opt out at the appropriate point.

However, what is the appropriate point? Even the minimal list of 'safe' areas given above will pose problems for some relatively inexperienced staff. Yet institutions are surely entitled to expect tutors to operate within the boundaries of their own professional context? The confusion here arises, again, from too wide a conception of the tutor's role, which necessitates the acknowledgement that tutors may find it necessary to 'opt out' of certain bits of it. On the contrary, if we have adequately defined the tutor's role there will be no question of opting out of it; rather, we shall allow the possibility that many teaching staff, for much of the time, will be able and willing to 'opt in' to an engagement with their students which goes a long way beyond this. Even so they will do so not out of a desire to dabble in counselling, but from a commitment to their tutoring role which they recognize must engage them fully and as 'whole' people if they are to give maximum help and support to their students.

Ideally, then, given that sort of commitment, why will tutors refer their students to others? Generally, it will be because this strategy looks as if it will offer the student better help and support. This may be because the tutor lacks the time, the expertise, or perhaps the neutrality that is required. In every case the tutor should know precisely why this referral is considered necessary or desirable, and it should be possible to explain this to the student. By putting it in this way, issues of referral may be seen within the context of a support system which accommodates these needs, rather than as exceptional cases which require special treatment. Where an effective support network exists, referral can be understood as part of the regular service that is available to students, not as signalling either some sort of breakdown in the system or some overwhelmingly severe problem.

Sometimes the reason for referral will be simply that the student needs more time than the tutor could reasonably be expected to spare. Often it will be a matter of putting the student in touch with specialist expertise. The student may need information to which the tutor does not or could not possibly have access, or skills which the tutor does not or could not reasonably be expected to possess. At other times it may be that there are issues involved in which the tutor has an interest which could get in the way of the kind of help and support the student needs. Sometimes, of course, all these reasons may apply.

Some students are undoubtedly particularly hard to help, perhaps because they are reluctant to ask for help or to accept the help that is offered. Sometimes they fight shy of coming to see their tutor, fail to keep appointments, or when they do come are reluctant to say very much. There are others

who cannot express what they think or feel, or who cannot accept that they need help. It is particularly difficult to help those who blame everyone but themselves, who are looking for instant solutions to their problems, or who refuse to take the next step. These are cases where quite difficult decisions have to be made, bearing in mind the principles set out above. It might be possible for a skilled counsellor to coax a better response out of the student and, in many cases, a referral will be appropriate. Yet higher education institutions are not therapeutic communities and it is questionable whether every student who is difficult to help should for that very reason be given further help. Tutors are not obliged to 'leave no stone unturned' in their efforts to help students. At some point it has to be recognized that enough effort has been expended, enough time given. In an institution in which everyone is adult, and treated as such, relationships have to be made mutually; they cannot be constructed single-handedly. So there are limits not only to what tutors themselves might do for students, but also to what they might ask others to do.

There is a wide range of agencies to which students might be referred, both within higher education institutions and outside them. However, so far as one can tell, tutors usually rely on personal contacts of their own, few using anything like the full range of services available. Often it does not occur to tutors to make contact with agencies outside their institutions, within the wider community. Most staff recognize that referral to a particular named person who is known to them personally is preferable to simply putting a student in touch with an organization.

How the referral is actually done is critical. Unless the issues have been thoroughly thought out and talked through with the student, then the student may feel that the tutor is walking away from the problem (which could, indeed, be true). As well as the student feeling somewhat 'fobbed off', there may well be residual feelings of guilt or inadequacy on the tutor's part. The tutor will in many cases want to continue to keep in close touch with the situation, not simply to 'drop' the student. This needs to be clear to all concerned. It helps the student if the referral is presented in terms of an extra resource being made available, rather than of a source of help being withdrawn or exchanged. The tutor needs to make it as clear as possible that he or she has not lost interest in the student.

The tutor also needs to make quite sure the student is being sent to the most appropriate place, that the person to whom the student is referred is willing to receive the student and is adequately prepared. This does not necessarily mean passing on all the information the tutor has about the student; it may be better if the student has a fresh start with someone who can listen with no preconceived ideas. However, it is essential that the student knows what has been said. Ideally, the student should be asked what information should be passed on, so that the transfer is accomplished by tutor and student together.

One way of summing up what is said here is to use three different terms to indicate three different types of process. 'Referral' suggests a process

managed entirely by the tutor; the student's role is simply to *be* 'referred'. 'Transfer' may be a slightly preferable concept in that it may be possible for a transfer to be effected jointly by tutor and student acting *together*. However, the idea of 'calling in' a third party suggests something else: it implies that the tutorial relationship remains intact, but that it is to be enriched by the addition of an extra dimension of, say, expertise.

All these considerations have a bearing on how referral might actually be done. It can now be seen that simply to suggest to the student that he or she should go and see someone else instead might be felt as very dismissive. At the other extreme, tutors might actually arrange the first appointment for the student. Generally speaking, it will be best to do rather more than the former and less than the latter. It will be helpful to talk to the student about why you are suggesting they go and see someone else. It will be helpful to make sure the student knows exactly where to go and to point them in the right direction. Yet, if possible, they should be left to arrange their own first appointment, so that they take responsibility for it, feel they 'own' it and that it is not just something done *for* them. Again, it will be helpful for the tutor to liaise as closely as possible with the person to whom the student is being referred. Whether it is a good idea to check up on the student to see if they went will depend on many factors; the student might feel it showed the tutor's continuing interest; alternatively, it might be felt as unduly intrusive.

This chapter has explored the need for clear thinking about the tutor's role. Is it that of counsellor, adviser, supervisor, advocate, friend or what? Unlike counsellors, tutors do not simply have to respond to situations which arise independently of them. Their job requires them to provoke such situations: to have a word with a student whose attendance is irregular; to explain to a student that his or her work is unsatisfactory; to challenge the student who may be trying to pass off as his own the work of someone else. Thus, tutors are helpers, but not *just* helpers. They do not only deal with students' problems, they sometimes create them. They may even be themselves part of the problem, because of what they have done or because of what they represent, and so become the target of the student's anger, envy, frustration or disappointment.

While it is good for tutors to have counselling skills, students look to their tutors for, and are entitled to expect, informed advice based on knowledge and experience. Personal tutors are expected to stick up for their students when necessary, but not to defend them regardless of the circumstances. There may sometimes be difficult judgements to make, one of which might be the development of a personal friendship. It is important to be clear that friendship with tutees is not what is asked of a tutor and is quite likely to create additional difficulties as a matter of fact. Rather, the tutorial relationship needs to be a businesslike, working relationship. Institutions of higher education may reasonably expect their teaching staff to carry out a thoroughly professional job of helping students through their courses; this

entails making responsible judgements, always with the student's best interests at heart.

Questions remain, of course, as to how institutions might allocate and differentiate staff responsibilities, how they might manage the overall provision of student support and, indeed, how they might conceptualize the process. These questions are addressed in the remaining chapters.

Part 3

Institutional Policy

9

Patterns of Provision

Institutions of higher education generally acknowledge some responsibility for student support and for the most part make formal arrangements to ensure that this responsibility is discharged. Yet even if they did nothing of this sort it would still be necessary to discuss the institutional dimension. It has already been argued that student support cannot sensibly be discussed without taking its context seriously. If, as Chapter 4 was concerned to show, the student experience is not just a personal, but a social experience, it follows that the nature of the institution in which higher education takes place will bear crucially upon the student's need for and experience of help and support.

Higher education institutions in Britain are by no means uniform in size, structure or mission; nor do they have a common pattern of student support provision. We need to look, in this chapter, at the varieties of institutional provision, so that we can highlight some of the underlying ideas and issues. In the next chapter, two sets of ideas will be identified as particularly influential; I want to suggest that they have shaped our perception of student needs and coloured our institutional responses. Chapter 11 will consider some other ideas and approaches which might be helpful, and which could or should have more influence. Finally, we shall confront afresh some key questions which underlie the provision of student support. Such questions are rarely faced explicitly. Most institutional arrangements are based on unexamined assumptions which do not stand up very well to careful scrutiny.

Examples of institutional provision

Readers who are not very familiar with British institutions of higher education, or whose familiarity is confined to one type of institution, may like to be reminded of the diversity of higher education in this country. Let us look briefly at six different institutions to see what provision each of them makes for student support. Of course, these sketches are stereotypes, but they may serve their purpose which is to illustrate a variety of contexts.

Institution A caters for 8,500 full-time students, and another 4,000 part-time. Its courses include a full range of Arts and Sciences, Technology, Business and Management. It occupies a single city-centre site, but has very little residential accommodation for students: just two small halls of residence (each of 450 places) some distance from the main site. The vast majority of students are home-based, either living with their families or in (mostly shared) self-catering accommodation rented from private landlords. The institution is effectively closed at weekends (except for the Students' Union building), but is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. most weekdays.

Student support is organized in various ways. First, there is a Department of Student Services, which includes a student medical service, a counselling service, a careers advisory service, a student housing service, and the wardens of the two halls of residence. Second, each academic department is responsible for providing every student based in that department with a 'personal tutor'. The precise role of these tutors has never been very clearly defined, and there is a great deal of variation in how members of staff understand and perform this role. Indeed, it varies to the extent that some staff make it their business to become the student's personal friend and confidante, while others do nothing unless or until the student presents him or herself with some sort of problem. Third, there are a number of more informal channels of help. The Students' Union employs one welfare rights and advice worker who may be consulted in the Students' Union building most days without an appointment.

Institution B was founded in medieval times and consists of a number of constituent colleges. The colleges are tourist attractions and are open all the year round to visitors. The whole university has approximately 10,000 students, but some of the colleges are as small as 400. The university arranges lectures, assesses students' work and awards degrees, but it is in the colleges that the real life of the institution goes on. Every student belongs to one of the colleges, each of which includes students studying a wide variety of subjects: in fact, a complete cross-section of the university. As a rule students spend their first year in residence in college and subsequent years in privately-rented accommodation. First degree courses are almost all of a standard length (three years). The only part-time students are those working for higher degrees or enrolled on short courses through the 'extra-mural' department.

Traditionally this kind of institution has relied on the college to meet the student's needs for social life and support. Many of the colleges are religious foundations and have a full-time chaplain who, though not an academic, is a member of the college community and whose responsibilities include the pastoral care of students. The chaplain is, in every case, an ordained priest of the Church of England and, therefore, male; a few colleges have appointed, in addition, a woman as a chaplaincy assistant. There is no other formal provision within the colleges, though the tuition provided is often more like private coaching and effectively means that students have frequent tutorial

contact with at least one member of academic staff. In recent years the university has set up a small counselling service, with two full-time counsellors available to students by appointment.

Institution C is a specifically technological institution. Therefore, it has a distinctive ethos associated with the pursuit of excellence in a relatively narrow range of studies. It has 5,500 students, most of whom are following courses in technology or business. The main building is adjacent to the site of a regeneration scheme for the inner city. Links with the industrial and commercial world are strong. Nearly every course includes some kind of industrial placement. There is no student accommodation. Students are almost all home-based. Many are mature students, the average age being 25, and they are predominantly male.

What little social life there is, is centred on the Students' Union building. In this context, most students in trouble would go first either to their doctor or to the welfare office in the Students' Union. The institution has appointed one counsellor for staff and students. In practice much of her time is spent with staff.

Institution D occupies an out-of-town purpose-built campus, constructed on a green field site in the 1960s. It is a small (3,000 students) institution with a high academic reputation in a small number of (mostly arts) subjects. The proportion of female/male students is 70/30. The majority of students come straight from school at 18 and are accommodated in purpose-built study-bedrooms on campus, each block having a resident warden drawn from the lecturing staff. There is also a significant minority of international students, some of whom are generously supported by their governments. Many students have cars, without which they would be rather stranded at weekends. The women students frequently express concern about the risk of being attacked, since the campus is extensive and the pathways are poorly-lit at night.

The institution provides the usual range of health and advisory services, but a great deal of day-to-day advising is done by the wardens of the halls of residence. In many cases this role is undertaken by single people who see it as an important part of their job, and conscientiously try to get to know their students and to be approachable to them. Faced with a personal problem, many students would find it easier to talk to their hall warden than to one of their lecturers. The university counsellor (there is only one) deals mostly with very serious problems, e.g. where a student has attempted suicide, and is qualified to offer long-term psychotherapy when necessary.

Institution E which has only 1,650 full-time students, is located on the outskirts of a large town. Founded for the purpose of training teachers, it diversified its courses in the 1970s and now trains social workers and a small number of health professionals such as occupational therapists. However, the overwhelming majority (1,000) of its students are intending to enter the teaching profession and 80% are female. Most of the full-time students are accommodated in the college or in rented accommodation nearby. A substantial proportion are mature women who live locally. As well as providing initial

training for teaching, the college acts as a centre for in-service training, which provides another 750 part-time students.

The college has a well-developed personal tutorial system whereby every student is allocated to a personal tutor for the duration of their course, which for the majority of students is four years. The tutor is likely to build up a strong relationship with his or her students. Time is set aside for regular personal interviews to review progress and to plan ahead. The personal tutor is responsible for monitoring the student's course work marks and, when the student leaves, for consulting with colleagues and writing the student's reference on behalf of the college Principal. The senior management team of the college includes a Dean of Students whose job description includes the pastoral care of all students. Nonetheless, in recent years some students have been sharply critical of the close attention they receive, saying they find it intrusive and sometimes not very supportive. The college authorities, however, are proud of this strong 'pastoral care' tradition which they see as modelling good practice for the teaching profession.

Institution F is far and away Britain's largest provider of higher education. Originally conceived as the University of the Air, it quickly developed innovative techniques of distance learning using radio and television programmes, correspondence texts, summer schools and some face-to-face tuition in local study centres. It caters for mature students who wish to study at home on a part-time basis. Most students pay their own fees. No qualifications are required for admission; entry is completely open access. The majority of its teaching staff work part-time and many are full-time members of staff of other higher education institutions. The degree programmes offered are all modular, based on the accumulation of credits.

From the first, it was recognized that counselling would have to be an important part of the university's provision, partly because it aimed deliberately to recruit a high proportion of students who were unprepared for higher education and partly because of the nature of the courses, which required student choice at every point. It was argued that students were going to need help to find their way through the system. (Of course, this is hardly 'counselling' in the technical sense; more like 'academic advice'.) Provision was initially made for every student to be allocated to *two* members of staff, a tutor and a counsellor. Before long these two roles were combined into one, so that the tutor-counsellor acted as tutor for the foundation stage and subsequently kept in touch with the students when they moved on to later stages of their programmes. What is important to notice here is that the idea of support (embracing academic support in subject-matter, study-skills support and personal support) was built into the system from the start.

Discussion

These six cameos of higher education institutions are offered simply to bring out some useful points. There is, in fact, more variety than this, partly

because individual institutions sometimes differ greatly from others nominally of the same type and partly because some institutions, especially the larger ones, incorporate within themselves a range of different types. Polytechnics, for instance, which have been formed by college mergers sometimes operate on a number of different sites including nearly all the types suggested above, i.e. city centre, leafy suburb, countryside campus, etc. The support they offer students may be similarly varied according to context.

However, with those provisos, it is possible to see here some striking differences in provision which can now be underlined. We can see that institutions may:

1. rely heavily on appointing specialist professionals to provide for student welfare;
2. rely almost entirely on academic staff to respond to students in trouble or difficulty;
3. rely on voluntary and informal arrangements and make very little specific or formal provision to help and support students.

One might be forgiven for thinking that these striking differences in provision are hardly surprising, given the wide range of organizational frameworks, varied sizes of institution, distinct traditions, unique mixes of clientele and contrasting missions. More than that, one might suppose that it does not matter very much exactly how student support is organized so long as students get the help they need. Is not the chief concern the *amount* of provision, not how it is organized or who provides it?

On the contrary, it matters a great deal. It is far from clear that different kinds of provision fulfil the same function only in different ways. There are, in fact, a number of rather different needs being met. To some extent this is a function of the provision itself; the different kinds of safety-net catch different sorts of problem. To pursue the metaphor one might add that if the mesh is wide enough some problems will simply slip through unnoticed.

A number of common themes can now be distinguished. Consciously or not, each of the institutions described above has adopted policies which imply particular answers to a set of key questions. Institutions have to make strategic decisions on the following issues, each of which may be considered as a pair of contrasting emphases, as follows:

1. Is student support to be seen as *prevention* or as *cure*?
2. Is the institution prepared to *take initiatives* or only to *respond to expressed needs*?
3. Is the support provision understood as *integral* to the educational task, or as *ancillary* to it?

Prevention or cure?

It will already be evident how easily discussion returns to consideration of students who have problems, even when one is trying to focus more on the

development of student potential. Even to polarize 'prevention' and 'cure' might be taken to imply an orientation towards dealing with problems. Much of the institutional provision outlined above has been designed, apparently, to provide a safety net for students, the aim being primarily to cope with those who fall by the wayside, not to ensure that they stay on the path and progress along it with all speed. It is as if the student support system is merely there in the background ready to come into action if and when something goes wrong.

If we resist this view and insist that student support, far from being a remedial mechanism, is properly part of the normal arrangements in the experience of every student, not just when he or she is failing, this would seem to imply that institutional provision of student support belongs with all the other institutional arrangements which seek to ensure that the student's experience is positive, enriching and rewarding. Its aim is not simply remedial, but it exists to promote the general welfare of the whole student body. Like the provision of a college library, it is something to which everyone is entitled and from which all may gain. Its aim is not to rescue students with problems and enable them to 'survive' or to 'cope', but to enhance the student experience for the benefit of all.

As an ideal, this would doubtless be widely supported, yet in practical terms it is often hard to secure resources for developing student support activities against rival priorities. The sketches above illustrate the extent to which contemporary higher education institutions may be finding it impossible to live up to their own high ideals. British higher education as a whole acknowledges the importance and value of student support, yet appears not to be resourcing it adequately. The result is that the curative model wins over the preventative. This is no abstract or theoretical point. It actually means that in many of our institutions students may have to attempt suicide before they qualify for serious attention.

Initiatives or responses?

It is likewise salutary to consider the extent to which the approaches outlined above are purely reactive. It is easy to suppose that all that such an institution need provide is an adequate response to articulated need. Yet it must be very obvious that, in dealing with such a vulnerable group of people, to wait for the cry for help may be to wait too long. Students sometimes do not know exactly what their problem is; they just feel vaguely unhappy, unwell, unable to concentrate. They may not even recognize that they have a problem at all. Or their problem may be that they are too shy or too embarrassed to seek help. It may not be sufficient to wait for the student to take the initiative; a helpful and supportive institution may have to be much more pro-active. A regular tutorial to review progress is likely to serve students better than an open invitation to pop in for a chat whenever they feel like it. In many institutions, however, the existing arrangements leave it to the student to take the initiative.

A further point related to this is that while students' needs are, of course, unequal, this does not justify a system of support which allows a small group to monopolize the help that is available. A demand-led system will favour those who are most demanding; but needs are not the same as demands, and an institution with a commitment to fairness has a responsibility to ensure that its resources are devoted to those whose needs are greatest, not those whose demands are loudest.

A support system designed simply to respond to need is likely to end up responding to demand unless it retains some sense of purposeful direction and is prepared to target its efforts and resources towards particular individuals or groups. Otherwise, just as there will be some students who get more than their share of what is available, so there will be other students who, perhaps because their problems are relatively minor and their coping skills relatively good (or possibly because they are shy about asking for help when they need it, or perhaps obstinately, even pathologically, independent), make minimal use of the support that is offered.

Low take-up is sometimes cited as a reason for dismantling support arrangements. However, if there are students who gain absolutely nothing from the offer of a personal tutorial relationship, that should be understood not as an indication of their admirable self-sufficiency, but rather as an implicit criticism of what is offered. As with teaching, some students may be able to manage on their own – may even prefer to do so; but it is important to note also that when the teaching is excellently done it is the most able students who are quickest to appreciate its value. Exactly the same might be said of student support. A lack of demand may signal not an absence of problems, but a low evaluation of the help offered.

Ancillary or integral provision?

A further tension, closely related to the others, concerns the extent to which the implementation of student support policy is seen as an integral part of, and organized within, the institution's teaching arrangements. Institutions vary as to whether personal tutorials are formally timetabled, or at any rate have a statutory amount of time that is supposed to be devoted to them, or whether it is left to individual tutors and tutees to make arrangements as required. They also differ as to whether the personal tutor is someone with whom the student comes into regular teaching contact, or is a member of staff who stands outside the teaching relationship and is to some extent independent of it. In a small college, of course, it may be quite difficult to ensure that every student has a personal tutor who is not involved in his or her teaching.

What is at issue here is the extent to which it is desirable that the student support system should operate, as far as possible, independently of the teaching, or whether there are strong arguments for integrating the two. As a rule, counselling services operate very much at the margins of institutions

– inevitably and quite properly – so that the student, as client, can be offered a personal service to meet his or her needs. It is important, too, from the professional counsellors' point of view, in that they should be able to function in a kind of insulated space, into which the internal politics of the institution cannot intrude and where the student can be offered a safe haven in which to speak freely, personally and confidentially. Yet it is clear that in many institutions there is a recognition that students may need different kinds of support; that 'ancillary' provision may meet only some needs, not all; and that the resources of teaching staff need to be mobilized to provide a much more general kind of safety net.

What is clear is that, when both kinds of provision are made, the more integrated provision is likely to have a primarily preventative function whereas some parts of the ancillary provision may be thrust into a purely curative role. That is to say, a student counselling service is liable to be seen very much as a student rescue service rather than as a support service; its clients will often be in serious trouble, having already exhausted their own support networks of family and friends, and having probably also sought help from more immediately available sources such as their tutors.

The point to notice here is that the functions of prevention and cure will tend to line up with the division of provision into integrated and ancillary. It is much easier for members of teaching staff, who may be in regular, possibly even day-to-day contact with the student, to provide a supportive relationship which enables the student to carry on, and prevents the student's problems getting out of control. It is when this is impossible, ineffective or inadequate, that more therapeutic or remedial help seems appropriate. That is more readily provided by someone who stands outside the normal business of a higher education institution, and can therefore offer both a more detached perspective and a safe, uncompromised relationship.

Improving current provision

While it is widely recognized that there is room for great improvement in this area, it is usually supposed that the problem is simply one of resourcing. It is true that the student support function of higher education institutions is currently under-resourced, whether in the form of student support services or personal tutorial systems. Many large universities employ only one or two counsellors, for instance, and there have been some steep rises in staff-student ratios. It is, therefore, likely that in the experience of the individual student the availability of support from either of these sources will have been significantly reduced. At the same time there are concerns about the quality of the support offered. To some extent this may be related quite simply to pressure of numbers. A careers adviser, say, may find that it is no longer possible to offer hour-long interviews, but instead may set aside 30 minutes only. However, as far as personal tutorials are concerned there is the serious possibility that not only is the student's share of the tutor's time quanti-

tatively reduced, but the tutor, subject to many demands and conflicting pressures, reaches the point where to offer a ready availability is to invite more informal student contact than can be coped with. At some critical point teaching staff may find it quite impossible to make themselves available to students in the way they once did *at all*, so that a personal tutorial arrangement which once included casual and informal contact is reduced, at best, to another appointment system. Clearly, a support system which simply pairs a student and a tutor, defines an entitlement of time for the student, specifies a minimum commitment for which the tutor is required to be available and then leaves it to the two of them to get together as best they can, is hardly likely to be adequate in present circumstances.

In a number of institutions the fact that the student support system is under great strain has led to some kind of review. In most cases this has been a matter of finding a more workable arrangement by which students may have access to teaching staff. It has been widely assumed that the professional support services, albeit in many cases understaffed, underfunded and possibly overworked, are perfectly clear about their role within an institution of higher education. Discussion has, therefore, focused on the support given to students by teaching staff, and concern has been expressed that they often do not have time or opportunity to help their students in the way they wish and students need. To this is sometimes added the suggestion that if student support functions are not always performed effectively, it may be a matter not simply of general resourcing, but of specific training. Unlike professional support staff, lecturers may have no training in interpersonal skills; possibly they need guidance and help in how to fulfil this aspect of their work. Courses of training, handbooks of guidance and institutional reforms have all been suggested in recent years with a view to improving this aspect of higher education.

These moves are, of course, to be welcomed and encouraged. However, effective remedies are dependent upon accurate diagnosis. It will not be helpful, for instance, to organize courses to help teaching staff to be better personal tutors if the problem is not so much that they lack skills, but that they are already so overloaded that they cannot do the job adequately, still less find time to attend a course. It is possible that some of our efforts in this direction are misconceived. While it is certainly true that the student support function needs to be given a higher priority, more staff time, a bigger share of resources, tighter organization, clearer goals, closer monitoring and better training, the fact remains that a fundamental reconsideration of the nature of the task is long overdue. Without this it is likely that whatever resources we commit, whatever new appointments we make or whatever training programmes we launch will still have disappointingly little effect.

The diagnosis which I want to offer here is really quite simple, but its implications are far-reaching; it is that we are working to the wrong model. Student support has been wrongly conceived. It is not so much that there is

confusion over what support students need and how help should be offered (though there is), but that we have often made wrong assumptions and so looked in the wrong kinds of places for answers.

It is certainly possible to find examples of higher education institutions with vague and woolly student support policies, but even where there are quite well-defined notions of what is required problems still remain. For policies are sometimes derived not from a fundamental rethink, but from firmly-held convictions based on traditional assumptions. It will, therefore, be necessary to examine the origins of some of the ideas which have given rise to these assumptions. The argument to be put forward here is that both vague confusion and false clarity need to be challenged by a much more radical critique than has so far appeared. The issue is not simply a matter of developing systems of student support that are more effective and less costly, but of identifying more precisely what is supposed to be available through the support of academic staff, who needs it and what it is for.

10

‘Pastoral Care’ and ‘Counselling’

The account of institutional provision in the previous chapter, while bringing out the variety of arrangements in different institutions, has also shown that, where provision is made, very broadly the arrangements fall into one or both of two categories. On the one hand, there is a reliance on academic staff to take a great deal of interest in those they teach and to interpret their role as including a great deal more than just teaching. On the other hand, there is a recognition that if student support matters it must be carried out by those who are specially trained, properly qualified and specifically appointed to the task. Thus, underlying the variety of provision it is possible to discern two sets of assumptions which inform and inspire the arrangements made. The first might be called the *amateur* tradition, the second the *professional*. These two very different sets of ideas apparently exist side by side; they must now be explored further if we are to understand why student support has been organized in this belt-and-braces fashion.

It should be noted that this is to approach the matter in a peculiarly British way. In North America, where student advising has developed into a distinct profession, institutions usually make extensive provision for student counselling and advice from people who have made it their specialism. It is, therefore, not seen as a shared responsibility where some kind of balance has to be struck between the professionals and the amateurs, but much more straightforwardly as a professional job to be done by its own qualified practitioners. The style of dealing with these matters in the rest of Europe is even more strikingly different; as a general rule, institutions of higher education on the continent do not share the British sense of responsibility for every aspect of the student's life, and are less inclined even to attempt to provide institutionally for the student's every need. The point to be made here is not to commend one tradition over another, and certainly not to suggest that one offers a model to be emulated by the other, but simply to highlight a contrast of educational attitudes which may go very deep. Nor is there any need to explain such a contrast here. It would be absurd to suggest that in the lands of Rousseau and of Froebel educators are somehow less concerned with treating the learner as a whole person, or that education on

the continent is pervaded by a narrow academicism whose influence has somehow failed to spread across the English Channel. It is more a matter of how the teacher's role has come to be understood and of how teachers are generally expected to behave.

To have strong amateur and professional provision side by side in the same institution is, then, a peculiarly British phenomenon. A characteristic North American reaction might be to ask why we did not leave it to the specialists. A characteristic French or German rejoinder might be to question whether it was necessary to make this kind of provision at all. Neither, perhaps, finds it easy to understand why we in this country accept the existence, side by side, of two very different approaches to student support.

That said, it must immediately be acknowledged that one of these approaches is much older than the other and, within British higher education, represents the mainstream tradition. The idea that 'pastoral care' is part and parcel of the teacher's task has been present from the beginning, whereas professional approaches to counselling in educational contexts have made their appearance only relatively recently. Nonetheless, the situation now appears to be that in many institutions these two contrasting approaches, amateur pastoral care and professional counselling, are seen as the two main ways of giving students formal and organized support. Thus, while institutional managers may prefer one approach to the other, or may treat them as complementary, or may find original ways of weaving the two strands together, in most cases they constitute the institution's whole repertoire of support provision. Other ideas exist and will be discussed in the next chapter, but there can be no doubt that these two dominate our thinking on student support.

Where have these ideas come from and why have they been so influential in shaping the kind of arrangements we have made for student support? We now need to trace each of these ideas to its source.

The British tradition of higher education

Some traditional assumptions embodied in British higher education, precisely because they are so familiar to us, are liable to go completely unnoticed; we need to bring them out into the open so that they may be critically reviewed. For the opposite reason, anyone who is not very familiar with the history of higher education in Britain needs to pay special attention to this background which has shaped British perceptions more than we usually admit.

The earliest universities were established as religious foundations, with a very clear brief to train the sons of gentlemen for the professions of law, medicine and the church. The young men were much younger than present-day students, sometimes only 14 or so. So the medieval university had more the character of a boarding school, with the teachers taking an explicit moral responsibility for their charges; hence, the idea of a Moral Tutor, a title

which still survives. University teachers were quite explicitly stated to be *in loco parentis*, and were clearly expected to keep control over their students. This disciplinary oversight was understood as having a religious as well as a moral dimension, by virtue of the fact that teachers would all be, as a matter of course, ordained clergymen. Thus, the young student was entrusted to the charge of someone older and supposedly wiser to act explicitly as a moral guide and father-figure, both 'governor' of behaviour and religious mentor; all this in the context of an academic community that was single-sex, residential and quasi-monastic.

This goes a long way to explain why student support has been conceived in terms of 'pastoral care', with strong religious and moral overtones. As is well-known, the oldest universities were groupings of small self-governing colleges, each of which was organized as a community. The living accommodation, dining hall, library and chapel were typically clustered round a cloistered quadrangle, so that the four elements of shared residence, shared scholarship, shared religion and even shared leisure were practically and symbolically linked. That model has had a most powerful influence on the development of British higher education. It holds up an ideal in which staff-student relationships are built around intimate and relaxed one-to-one tutorials, and student-student relationships are encouraged by extensive opportunity for peer support. It is impossible to understand current higher education provision in Britain without recognizing the extent to which it has been moulded by this tradition, partly by building on it and partly by reaction against it.

At first glance it may appear that a polytechnic, formed in the 1960s by amalgamation of existing local-authority colleges with a primarily vocational emphasis, is quite free from the Oxbridge tradition, ordering its student support provision in a way that owes nothing to the medieval university and its elite, independent, small-scale, single-sex, religious-foundation colleges. A polytechnic has, after all, quite a different set of priorities, which include comprehensive higher education, equal opportunities for all, links with and service to the local community, and responsiveness to the needs of the national economy. In any case, successive waves of higher education expansion have moved the tradition on. Civic universities founded at the end of the 19th century ('redbrick'), post-Second World War developments ('plateglass'), out-of-town 'campus' universities, city-centre 'technological' universities – each of these types added its own distinctive ethos, while yet retaining elements of continuity with the past. The foundation of 30 polytechnics at the end of the 1960s represented an explicit break with the university tradition. The whole point was that they should be a quite different kind of institution, offering a new kind of 'public sector' higher education. The designation of several new polytechnics at the beginning of the 1990s might be thought to confirm this radical shift away from traditional forms of higher education.

Yet, in practice, it has not worked out quite like that. The so-called binary system obscured the extent to which some of the same traditional ideals reappeared in public sector institutions in a new guise. Part of the significance

of the title 'university' is that it stands for the continuity of this tradition. It is true that the polytechnics were meant to start with a clean sheet and develop their own identity. However, the binary system exaggerated the differences between the two sectors and the similarities within them. Old ideals were often transformed out of all recognition, but that is not to say that they disappeared without trace.

Partly, this is the result of the particular mix of opportunities and constraints with which the polytechnics were faced throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As publicly funded institutions under the control of local education authorities and lacking, until April 1989, the independence of the universities, the polytechnics were subject to financial pressures and economic constraints which bore much more heavily on the public sector. Yet at the same time they were quicker to respond to political pressure to widen access. The polytechnics consequently led the way in admitting more non-traditional students, a group likely to be in particular need of help and support.

It could also be argued that the strongly vocational emphasis of polytechnics has put a higher premium on careers advice. While more traditional institutions continued to provide a specialized, but liberal education for the majority of their students (offering what careers help they could, but treating it as in the last resort the student's affair as to precisely how, or even whether, they subsequently made use of their degree), the polytechnics encouraged the idea that successful completion of a course should lead directly to employment. As that expectation has become increasingly problematic, demand has risen for a careers service which not only relates closely to the course but also develops the student's own self-understanding, adaptability and transferable skills. Another pressure has arisen from the development of unit-based course structures which, it is widely recognized, presuppose enhanced resources for student support and advice. Despite all these pressures, or perhaps because of them, the polytechnics have managed both to preserve some of the traditional features of British higher education and to pioneer modifications of them. Nowhere is this more evident than in student support.

The polytechnics quickly established Departments of Student Services offering a comprehensive service including help with accommodation, medical attention, careers advice and counselling, services which in many universities were relatively undeveloped or unco-ordinated. Yet it was also felt that every student should have a personal relationship with a least one tutor. The new institutions developed personal tutorial systems, whereby tutors each took responsibility for a small number of students and made themselves available to them for informal discussion about their work and progress. This kind of provision was clearly derived from an attempt not to abolish, but to reshape and reappropriate a very traditional concept of higher education; the personal tutor in a modern polytechnic is the successor to the moral tutor in medieval Cambridge.

One key feature of this tradition has been the emphasis on *residential* experience. It is a tradition to which the very idea of distance education is

profoundly alien. A university education was conceived to be a matter of being present, not just attending classes, but dining in hall and being in residence in the college.¹ For the concept of a university education was one which involved the informal processes of education as much as the formal ones. The undergraduate was supposed to learn as much from his extra-curricular activities as from lectures; he was supposed to learn as much from his peers – probably studying quite different subjects – as from his own studies; and he was supposed to learn qualities of character from team-games. So it was that he learned to be a man, a gentleman and a scholar all at once. So long as even faint traces of this ideal linger on, we cannot be surprised if higher education, along with its residual elitism and sexism, is inclined towards a certain nostalgia for the residential experience.

Despite current growth in numbers of home-based students, the idea remains that it is good to have the opportunity to 'go away to college' and that this is part of the growing-up process which we ought to be able to offer to young people. The fact that this ideal often cannot be honoured does not diminish the force by which it is held. It is a brave polytechnic director who is willing to declare publicly that the institution has no obligation towards housing students; more typically, senior administrators express regret that they can only accommodate a small proportion of enrolled students, while seeking maximum publicity for schemes which may marginally improve their student accommodation.

Yet to see the extent to which this is a culturally and historically located idea, one only needs to look at other traditions, where quite different notions apply. There is a strong tradition, for instance, of the wandering scholar who gleanes learning from many sources and whose commitment is not to a rooted community, but to a restless pilgrimage. However, there has been little of that tradition in the British context. Similarly, there is the idea of sitting at the feet of a 'master' or 'guru' – again one looks in vain for signs that this has ever been an influential idea in British higher education. As for public disputation, once a major means of disseminating knowledge and building an academic reputation throughout Europe, it survives in Britain only in the formal requirement in some universities that PhD vivas are in principle open to the public. However, the British way of doing things has never been like that. The big public lecture has never been a key feature of our system, except perhaps in the early days of university 'extra-mural' extension. Characteristically, university education has always been regarded as something that occurs between friends, not adversaries, within a community, not outside it, and preferably in the atmosphere of an all-male club, thick with tobacco smoke and leather armchairs. It is altogether a more aimable tradition of higher education, relaxed and unhurried, where even sharp debate is invariably couched in the politest of language, and where disagreements are expressed in the mildest of terms and with a maximum of courtesy.

It is not just that, in Britain more than elsewhere, the residential experience in higher education retains a peculiar significance; it takes a particular form, i.e. provision of individual study-bedrooms on college premises, students

only exceptionally being asked to share. In the United States student accommodation normally consists of double rooms, though with some provision for the 'oddballs' who request to be on their own. This example illustrates well just how differently the social aspects of college life may be conceived; having a room-mate is part of the American idea of higher education. It also suggests an important qualification to the image of higher education as membership of a club; while always a corporate experience involving quite intimate relationships, higher education in Britain has made careful provision for privacy.

Themes like these lie below the surface of contemporary institutions which only *appear* to have left them all behind. In the story of British higher education there are threads of historical continuity running through every chapter: Oxford's insistence that undergraduates dine regularly in hall and the Open University's determination to retain its summer schools may be seen as points along a line of tradition which asserts that, ideally, higher education is a social experience as well as an intellectual one. The polytechnics with their explicit commitment to quite contrary values might be seen as marking the end of this tradition, the point at which the medieval vision of university education was finally laid to rest, were it not for a few discrepant features of which the personal tutorial system is perhaps the most remarkable. It is hard to account for this without reference to the survival of traditional ideas such as that of pastoral care.

The idea of pastoral care

The tradition of pastoral care has proved itself astonishingly resistant to historical change. No longer sustained by strong religious roots, it nonetheless derives much of its legitimacy from its religious connotations, persisting strongly in quite unlikely contexts. Until recently it has received almost no criticism (Pattison, 1988) and it is high time it was sharply challenged, especially in view of the way it appears to have influenced educational policy and provision, both for school children and for students in higher education. Had we been less mesmerized by the tradition of which it is a part we might have been more cautious in developing patterns and styles of student support which, however different in details, rely on essentially the same basic paternalistic assumptions. It does not seem too much of an exaggeration to say that the idea of pastoral care has functioned very much like an ideology.

If we look at contemporary institutions of higher education without being distracted by this ideology, we might be struck by the arrogance with which one group of people (teaching staff) suppose that they can help another group of people (students) in ways that go beyond either the specialist knowledge or the teaching expertise which their job entails. It is, of course, understandable that this basic assumption might have arisen, and continued unchallenged, as a result of ideas about the nature of the higher education experience which have been current in the tradition. However, to explain is

not to justify and it certainly needs a better justification than it has so far been given.

Several key questions may now be posed much more sharply than before. Once off their subject, by what right do teaching staff presume to have any guidance to offer their students? By what right dare they offer themselves to students even in a non-directive counselling capacity? What makes them suppose that this is needed or will be appreciated? Even supposing they possess aptitude and/or skills in this area, surely someone with responsibility for teaching (not to mention assessing) the student is the very last person who should be drawn into a very personal discussion? These questions have rarely been asked and one is entitled to ask why. I suggest that the ideology of pastoral care has inhibited this discussion by implicitly promoting the idea that the assumption of tutorial responsibility for someone else was invariably benign. Some of the difficulties concerning the tutor's role and the tutorial relationship may now be refocused around and attributed to the idea of pastoral care.

Such questions pose themselves particularly sharply, of course, where a substantial proportion of students are no longer coming straight from school, where they have more experience of life, and where they may be as old as, or even older than, some of their teachers. Yet, as already argued when discussing the tutorial relationship, all students, if they are to be treated as the adults they are, must be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them; that applies both to academic learning and to practical coping with the vicissitudes of life.

Furthermore, as anyone who has counselled teaching staff could confirm, teachers in higher education today are likely to have at least as many problems themselves as many of their students. They, too, may be lonely, homesick, worried about forthcoming examinations, in debt or going through unpleasant divorce proceedings. Before blithely coupling together the student's need for support and the tutor's responsibility for the student as a whole person, we should remind ourselves of tutors whose own personal lives are in chaos, whose emotions are in turmoil and whose finances are in ruins.

Why do we always assume that the provision of help and support is all on one side? Can we not imagine a situation where a student actually helps the tutor? It is surely quite evident that some students may have longer experience, deeper understanding, fewer hang-ups, better judgement and more developed interpersonal skills than their tutors. Who then helps whom? Is there any particular reason to suppose that a member of staff acting as personal tutor is necessarily in any position to help an individual student with anything other than the course itself? In so far as questions such as these are hardly ever seriously considered, it would appear that our thinking on student support has been coloured by a concept of pastoral care which is anachronistic, leading us to make tutorial arrangements which are inappropriate.

Worse, they may be positively dangerous. Paternalistic or patronizing forms of helping can cause resentment if they are recognized by the student

as an abuse of the teacher's authority. Alternatively they may go unrecognized by either party, thereby creating a relationship of unhealthy dependency. This, too, is an abuse of the teacher's position of power vis-à-vis the student. Of course, these are not necessarily objections to the whole idea of student support being provided in a systematic way by teaching staff through some sort of personal tutorial scheme, but they suggest a number of pitfalls for the unwary arising from uncritical acceptance of a pastoral care model.

The counselling model

The second main source of ideas on student support comes from counselling. This is of much more recent origin, closely associated with the development of psychology as a discipline. Nonetheless, it appears to have a similar kind of influence on student support to that of pastoral care; that is to say, it functions as an ideology.

One of the difficulties is that the general idea is applied so loosely that practitioners of so-called counselling can be operating at a considerable distance from any recognizable counselling theory. The term 'counselling' is often used to include various kinds of advisory work, despite the fact that according to many theories of counselling it is, crucially, non-directive, quite the opposite of giving advice. There is, of course, a body of counselling theory; yet there are many different approaches and while some general principles are established and held by virtually all schools of thought, there is as yet no unified theory of counselling.

Nonetheless, strict criteria for professional recognition have been established, together with clear guidelines for practice. Any counsellors working in higher education are likely to be formally qualified and working to well-established principles. They will be clear that their responsibility is exclusively to their client, a commitment which gives a certain freedom, yet to which they are restricted in that they have to put the interests of their client first rather than be more generally helpful. This may not square exactly with what the institution would like from them, but strictly speaking these are the only terms on which a counsellor can operate professionally. If institutions want general student welfare officers, for instance, or student advisers, they have to appoint people specifically to those roles, leaving their counsellors to operate exclusively one-to-one and in strict confidentiality. Counsellors operating strictly to this understanding of the task would not feed back information to a student's tutors (or only rarely, and with the student's explicit permission), nor would they have any interest in discovering 'the other side of the story'. They attend only to their client, necessarily dealing with the student's experience as personal and individual rather than as the social experience which Chapter 3 claimed it to be. We therefore need to be clear that counselling in this strict sense is only part of the work of helping and supporting students, not the whole of it.

Yet the term 'counselling' continues to be used loosely, and is sometimes claimed by those with little or no formal training. Counselling serves as the best model, sometimes the only model, people have for one-to-one interaction. A nurse working in a student health service, or a student elected to office in the Students' Union, may say 'I have to do a lot of counselling, though I'm not really trained for it'. What they mean is that individuals come to see them privately to consult them. It is in this way that the idea of counselling has a pervasive influence on the whole provision of student support. Careers Advisers, Chaplains and Housing Officers, all at times find it necessary to describe their work as 'counselling' even though they know strictly speaking it is not. Thus, the language of counselling is used, in default of anything better, to describe various kinds of one-to-one conversations. This then misleads us into thinking of these other activities as in some way quasi-counselling, performed amateurishly by staff who have not had the requisite training.

The confusion arises like this: because these are obviously not cases of counselling in the strict sense, there is first of all an implication that these activities are not *proper* counselling, and then a suggestion that they should become so. In other words, the use of counselling language itself beguiles us into supposing that, done properly, these tasks would be *counselling* tasks. The very ambiguity of counselling assists the process, since it can initially be quite loosely applied to many different activities and subsequently tightened up to determine the sort of activities they shall be. This is part of what is meant by describing it as an ideology: a set of ideas which dominates our thinking and to which we look for guidance as to how to fulfil our role. The point has already been made that tutoring is a distinct role, not to be assimilated to counselling; the same is true of other support roles. That is not to say that counselling skills (and for that matter many other kinds of skills, such as interviewing or social work) would not be useful. However, it is important to resist the suggestion that all the various ways in which students are given help and support are some form of counselling.

An area of work like student support which does not seem to have been adequately thought through is particularly susceptible to this kind of influence from ideas which are either so well established that they appear to be immune from criticism, like pastoral care, or so little understood that they are imbued with a sense of mystique, like counselling. It is as if, in the absence of any more satisfactory theory, these more plausible candidates move easily into the vacuum, and assume an inappropriate importance and influence.

It is doubtful whether we should allow the activity of tutoring to be determined by a model of counselling, not least because counselling in the strict sense imposes a rather restrictively individual account of what is going on. We might rather conclude that our institutions should provide a range of different kinds of support, in which pastoral care and counselling would take their place alongside other forms of guidance and advice (perhaps including other forms of helping such as social work intervention), all of which would be supplementary to the provision of tutorial support by teaching staff.

We should not be unduly influenced by what is done elsewhere. For instance, many higher education institutions in the USA make very substantial counselling provision, yet appear to have nothing corresponding to the tutorial. However, this reflects a more therapeutically-based culture in which people are generally much more ready to consult a counsellor about their personal problems. In Britain people are still very reticent about personal matters and reluctant to share them with strangers, at least until their problems are beginning to become unmanageable. The needs of British students may at present best be met largely through providing tutorial rather than counselling support, not because there is anything intrinsically wrong with a counselling approach, which could become much more necessary in the future, but more pragmatically because this is not how we in Britain are used to tackling matters of this kind. This is not to say that tutors do not benefit from acquiring counselling skills, nor that counselling provision should not be steadily and substantially increased, but it is to question the wisdom of tutors taking counselling as a model for their tutoring role.

One major objection to counselling is that it can function simply as a palliative; it may serve to pacify those who are rightly disturbed at some injustice, thus colluding with the institution's establishment by defining any dissenter as 'sick'. It operates in any case according to a medical model, with consultations in a consulting room, by appointment, aiming to help people with *their* problems. However, what if the problems are not their private hang-ups, but more general problematic situations that affect many others? The counsellor who sees students one at a time has no means of knowing whether their complaints are just, still less of taking remedial action. The 'complaint' can appear rather as a quasi-medical symptom, the problem being located within the individual, not in any of the other people involved, nor in the social system.

Few counsellors would recognize that description except as a caricature. Yet it cannot be denied that the counselling model tends to pull us back to the discipline of psychology and to neglect the social dimension of student life which was pointed to in Chapters 3 and 4. Suppose, for instance, a student has quarrelled with a flat-mate. Counselling may, indeed, be helpful to the one who comes to seek help, but it is only by stepping outside the counsellor role as strictly defined that it would be possible to deal with this as an interpersonal rather than as a personal problem.

This criticism of counselling carries weight to the extent that counselling is allowed to dominate the provision of student support by being appropriated as a model by all those involved. As one resource among many, a counselling service may perhaps legitimately focus on the psychological needs of the individual. However, problems arise if all student helpers begin to use the language of and to define their role in terms of counselling. This has the effect of privatizing students' problems and leaving nobody to challenge such a 'diagnosis'.

What is being resisted here is the suggestion that the idea of counselling, any more than the idea of pastoral care, provides on its own an adequate model for student support. Yet it has to be admitted that it is a powerful

and influential model which is as likely to distort the work of, say, careers advisers as of personal tutors. Just as the idea of pastoral care has permeated British higher education to the point where it appears to cover almost anything a tutor might do to help a student, so the idea of counselling has more recently come to be seen misleadingly as all, not part, of what student support offers.

What stands out clearly from this discussion is the extent to which student support provision is culturally and historically located. It belongs in a context; lifted out of that context it may be wholly inappropriate. What was once a sensitive and caring approach may now appear intrusive and interfering. The kind of help given and the manner in which it was offered by a scholastic clergyman in medieval times to his young gentlemen may be wholly inappropriate for a polytechnic lecturer acting as personal tutor to a group of mature women of his own age. The psychotherapeutic help sought and received by a young American psychology student from her student counselling service cannot serve as a model for a British engineering student in consultation with his personal tutor. There is no short cut to working out for ourselves what is appropriate in our own situation.

We might ask, first, whether we have the best balance between these two kinds of help: whether we should seek to develop a more extensive student welfare service or whether we should focus more on the informal help that can be given to students by members of academic staff. We might also ask whether we want to encourage this dichotomy in our provision, keeping student welfare quite distinct from the teaching function, as in the USA, or whether we want to encourage maximum integration of the two. However, there is a more radical question waiting to be asked, which is whether we are perhaps using the wrong models altogether.

I believe we may have been overestimating the help we can get by relying on these twin traditions of pastoral care and counselling. Under the influence of these two powerful sets of ideas we may have been thinking of student support in ways that are not particularly helpful, even misleading.

Some tutors' ambivalence about becoming personally involved with students could be attributed to the operation of these twin ideologies. On the one hand, lacking counselling skills, they feel unqualified to undertake this kind of role; on the other, they feel a sense of moral obligation to do what they can; yet because the role is ill-defined they remain fearful of being drawn in too deep. Tutors are, thus, often caught up in the contradictions between these two views of the support role. If it is counselling it requires special skills; but if it is pastoral care there is a moral obligation on every member of teaching staff to attempt it. It is small wonder that tutors have felt they were attempting to square the circle: that some have apparently looked for ways to avoid this kind of responsibility, and that others have devoted a disproportionate amount of time to it and sometimes, lacking training, got out of their depth. The tutors' problems can now be seen to be, to a large extent,

the result of the dominance of these two models, neither of which is adequate on its own and which, taken together, are impossible to reconcile.

Note

1. I believe that in Scotland and elsewhere there has been a longer tradition of home-based students and rather less emphasis on higher education as a residential experience.

11

Alternative Models of Support Provision

Two models of student support have been outlined. The first derives from a very traditional view of higher education and is characteristically expressed in the provision of personal tutorial arrangements. It attempts to embody ideals of pastoral care and moral responsibility as inseparable from the teaching function, thereby betraying traces of the medieval, collegial and strongly religious context in which it originated. I have suggested that this model has exerted a powerful hold on our imagination; it reflects what, according to a conventional account, higher education quintessentially *is*. Despite the very different picture of higher education presented in the campus novels of, say, Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, it is the world captured in the novels of C. P. Snow, the cloistered quadrangle, that still provides the most widely understood image of what is meant by a university education. Provision for student support in many contemporary institutions of higher education relies very substantially on and is largely sustained by this vision.

Alongside that model, which fits less and less well into a modern higher education system with its large, looser and pluralistic institutions, is a model of student support based on professionalism and the idea of service. This is most clearly seen in the development, in some institutions, of highly organized Departments of Student Services. There is a clearly felt need in every institution to establish a central resource, staffed by professionals and readily available to all students. Development along these lines has actually been quite modest by comparison with some American institutions. However, where a strong central resource is established to operate independently of teaching departments it can offer a service to clients which is clearly understood to be ancillary to the main task of the institution, which asks of teaching staff only that they know about it and from time to time make appropriate referrals to it. On this model, for lecturers to dabble amateurishly in counselling is dysfunctional when the institution employs professionals who have specialist expertise in the necessary areas.

Thus, the two models pull in different directions. An institution which tries to combine elements of both models must expect a certain amount of tension between them. In so far as there is adequate ancillary provision accessible to

all, teaching staff may feel relieved of their 'pastoral' responsibility for their students; and to the extent to which there is a well-established and effective system for personal tutorials, this may be seen as diminishing the need for a central service staffed by professionally qualified support staff. Institutions may find that they are sending out contradictory messages in seeking to affirm the value of both kinds of provision.

It may be objected that this is to misunderstand the complementary nature of these two kinds of provision. The fact is, however, that there is generally a very poor understanding of exactly how these roles complement each other and from a management point of view they frequently appear to be alternative ways of fulfilling the same task. Indeed, where teaching staff are expected to exercise 'pastoral care' without specific resourcing, it will seem as if they can offer virtually the same service at a fraction of the cost of employing specialist support staff.

However, it is actually more complicated than this. There is, of course, some overlap of function, but it is greater with some kinds of support than with others. If it is a matter of listening to a student's account of a personal problem, for instance, there may in fact be very little difference between what a tutor and a professional counsellor might each do. However, as soon as we consider, say, the central provision of a medical service, it is fairly clear that it would be rather irresponsible for a member of teaching staff to recommend a favourite remedy of his or her own when there is a student health service from which the student could get expert professional medical advice and treatment. If, on the other hand, we consider careers advice, many would say that teaching staff have a positive duty not just to respond when asked, but to initiate discussions with students about their future, especially when, as is often the case, they have knowledge and experience that is relevant to the particular career in which the student is interested. Provision of a central careers advisory service would never, one hopes, discourage teaching staff from helping students in this way. Institutions need to be quite clear about what is being asked or expected of staff with regard to the different kinds of help and support they may be able to give to students.

It must be clear from the two previous chapters that existing provision can generally be described not as the implementation of carefully worked out and self-consciously chosen policies, but as derived from some fairly conventional and for the most part unexamined assumptions. Institutions have tended to respond to perceived student needs within their own particular frame of reference. Thus, notions of pastoral care have been deeply embedded in the tradition of what higher education has been understood to be, and the arrangements made have arisen from, worked within and contributed to sustaining that set of assumptions. The development of tutorial arrangements has to be seen within a broader framework in which certain assumptions were being made about the students and about the nature of the higher education experience. That kind of provision belongs within and only makes sense against that background.

In the context of late twentieth century Britain, however, that picture

becomes increasingly implausible. Universal participation in a shared religious tradition has given way to overt pluralism, strident individualism and an aggressively instrumental approach to higher education. Consequently, it has seemed 'natural' to reach for a very different set of ideas to underpin student support provision: specifically, counselling help offered in privacy and by appointment by professionally qualified specialists. It has not been sufficiently noticed that this kind of approach sharply contrasts with the former. Perhaps partly because of this lack of analysis, the newer model has not, in practice, come to replace the older one, but has overlaid what is left of it.

So far, it has been suggested that these two models of student support, in many ways polar opposites, are both present in our contemporary institutions. The task of this chapter is to extend the analysis further by drawing attention to a number of other models which seem to be implicit in current practice.

Support provision via the curriculum

One approach which appears to have been gaining ground in recent years puts the emphasis on the curriculum itself and attempts to provide support through the actual courses which students follow. Helping and supporting students then appears not as some extra-curricular activity for which time has to be found, but as a normal part of the course. There are a number of quite practical reasons why, in the British context, this might seem a sensible way forward.

First, the sheer size of many modern institutions has meant that they cannot any longer be thought of or experienced as communities. For the most part they are no longer the sort of institutions where members may expect to recognize nearly every face they meet. Reliance on casual encounters is, therefore, likely to be ineffective; anything important has to be programmed into the timetable, not left to chance, simply because the odds of that chance have been dramatically reduced.

Second, the complexity of organization makes it increasingly difficult to fit in unscheduled meetings of any sort. Most students in most institutions now commute daily to college rather than living on campus, and institutions quite commonly occupy a number of widely-spaced sites, with staff moving regularly between them. The inclusion of work experience and new developments in franchising courses, not to mention the growing research and consultancy profiles of many developing institutions, provide many more reasons why members of staff may be unavailable to students. Some institutions in any case employ a substantial proportion of teaching staff on part-time contracts whose personal availability may be limited to a few hours in the week.

Third, academic departments which were once focused on a single academic discipline and often primarily concerned with the teaching of that subject at undergraduate level for a degree in that same discipline now find themselves engaged in a much wider range of activities. This effectively

means that students increasingly find their academic home not within their department, but their course. For many students, extra-curricular provision is effectively no provision at all; if they are to be offered support it has to be as part of the course. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there has been a growth of interest in alternative ways of providing support to students through courses rather than through academic departments or whole institutions.

Yet it can sometimes happen that even the course is no longer a common experience for all students. The fact is that students themselves are less likely to be permanently residing in or regularly attending the institution in the way that was once taken for granted. Institutions increasingly deal not with a settled population of students who work alongside each other over a substantial period of time, but with a range of very different individuals whose needs coincide for certain quite specific purposes and for a limited period, e.g. for the completion of a particular unit of work. Through credit accumulation schemes and mixed-mode attendance students can now proceed through their courses at their own pace, perhaps even constructing their own personal programme from what the institution has on offer. As courses are broken up into distinct units, students need even more help in making sense of their varied experiences and in seeing things as a whole; yet the modularization of courses can render this practically difficult if not actually impossible.

Example 1

It is worth describing one particularly influential innovation along these lines: the 'Freshman Seminar' as originally developed at the University of South Carolina. This course, code-named *University 101* in the University's programme of courses, carries credit and runs throughout the Fall Semester every year.¹ It is chosen by about half the students, though students with a weak academic background are specifically recommended to enrol for it.

The aims of University 101 are: to introduce students to the institution, to show them what is expected of them, to help them towards a better understanding of their own learning processes, and to encourage them to help themselves, to help each other by functioning as a mutually-supportive group and, when necessary, to seek expert help and advice. The following are regarded as essential elements of the Freshman Seminar: reading set books or articles; writing critical reactions; study skills and time management; library skills; information about careers and course requirements; awareness of resources available on campus both for individual help and social contact; understanding of policies and regulations about such matters as grading and assessment; insight into the working lives of teaching staff; consideration of the purposes of higher education; and group-building exercises. Although the principles are clear, there is no set syllabus; teachers develop their own courses with their particular group of students. The course, therefore, relies heavily on the interest and enthusiasm of its teachers. Staff are recruited to

teach University 101 on the basis that they are willing to receive training, which is given through Faculty Development Workshops to promote the aims of the programme and provide training in teaching methods.

The course has now been running for nearly 20 years and has been widely imitated throughout the United States and elsewhere. It has led to a great deal of attention being given to the First Year Experience; the staff of University 101 have established, at the University of South Carolina, a National Center for the Study of the Freshman Year which organizes regular conferences and produces a steady stream of publications on this theme.

What is interesting about this development is that it starts in a quite different place from either of the two models discussed above. It arises not from any impulse to perpetuate an ethos of pastoral care, nor from any idea of solving individual students' problems by adding some sort of supplement in the form of individual counselling, but simply from a sensitivity to the predicament of the incoming student. The approach of the Freshman Seminar is straightforward and direct; it assumes that the way to meet students' needs is to provide a course. Staff are, therefore, encouraged to identify needs that are common to incoming students and to design a course that meets those needs.

Although developed originally in the USA, the Freshman Seminar suggests a direction in which some British institutions of HE might like to go. As we have seen, it is extremely difficult to avoid student support provision appearing as merely ancillary to the main task of the institution. This is true whether it be the province of a separate department of 'support services' or whether it rests on conscientious and caring members of teaching staff. What a curriculum model offers is a way of affirming and demonstrating the institution's commitment to student welfare not as some sort of extra, but as part of its central concern. Furthermore, it shifts the focus quite decisively away from helping those students who have particular difficulties in surmounting specific obstacles to optimizing the experience of students whether they have problems or not. It makes this provision, quite literally, *as a matter of course*. Institutions which go down this road have signalled unmistakably that student support belongs on their agenda not as an appendix, but as part of what they are centrally about.

In the USA the natural way to express this is through the provision of a credit-bearing course; participation remains optional for students. In Britain it might be more appropriate to identify such units or modules as part of a common core, to be followed by every student; this would ensure that student support was, and was seen to be, integral to the course as a whole. Again, it might seem preferable to put less weight on the provision of actual classes and more on individual tutoring arrangements which are more in keeping with British traditions of higher education. However, the central point remains: if student support is an integral part of what the institution provides rather than simply bolted on to it, and if it is understood to be fundamental to ensuring maximum value in the higher education experience rather than simply a safety net to catch those who fall, then whatever form or forms the

institution's provision takes will have to include elements that are firmly built into the formal structure of courses.

Example 2

One way in which this is beginning to be done is in the use of portfolios. This kind of provision lends itself to adaptation for a specific course rather than implementation across a whole institution and there have been a number of experiments along these lines. One particularly interesting scheme may serve to illustrate the possibilities of this kind of strategy (Morton and Steele, 1991). It involves students in regularly completing a short questionnaire which invites them to assess their own progress and to identify any areas of perceived difficulty. Completed questionnaires then become the basis for a short interview with the tutor, in which the student's perceptions can be compared with those of the tutors. Experience of operating a scheme of this kind suggests that there is often a mismatch between the student's anxieties and the concerns of teaching staff. Students may be worrying needlessly; alternatively, staff may be making unwarrantable inferences, perhaps on the basis of high test scores, about the student's ability and understanding. This kind of scheme provides a way of exposing these discrepancies which can then be discussed with the student. Apart from the practical usefulness of this kind of information to both parties, it is believed that the very process of completing the questionnaires is of intrinsic value to the students, in that it encourages them to reflect on, and to become more aware of, their own learning processes, which is itself conducive to more efficient learning.

Although such a scheme focuses on the course itself and ostensibly comprises a regular review of progress, its value is understood to extend much more widely. Either on the written questionnaire or in the subsequent interview students may be invited to offer reasons for non-completion or late presentation of work. The interview provides a relatively safe format within which any personal problems can be raised, not as matters to be discussed for their own sake, but as factors which may be affecting the student's work. The whole procedure is clearly understood to be a course-related tutorial, rather than counselling. In such a context, members of teaching staff who would be wary of involvement in the latter are encouraged to provide support to their students as a matter of routine, by procedures which serve to demystify the process. Courses which have adopted this kind of system report not only that students appreciate it, but that teaching staff feel it provides them with a workable framework within which to operate. One key factor seems to be the provision of clear guidelines, so that teaching staff do not feel they are being asked to get into a totally unscripted and open-ended personal discussion, but that they are being given, in effect, a formal agenda to follow. Once the task is defined as clearly as this, it is reasonable to expect all teaching staff to take part; it is not in any sense a counselling role for which staff might volunteer their services, it is simply a way of performing the teaching role. It might

be described, without disparagement, as provision of student support by numbers, in that the tutor simply follows a prescribed step-by-step procedure with back-up and referral options explicitly available.

The two examples just described are very different indeed. Yet they have in common a determination to build student support into the student curriculum itself and contrast quite sharply with more traditional forms of support, whether provided by teaching staff or by support professionals, which in either case are essentially extra-curricular.

Workplace welfare

Another approach to student support is that which sees it very much through the eyes of a manager of personnel. Educational institutions, according to this account, may be viewed as much like any other kind of institution; they contain a large number of people who perform different functions within the organization. Their arrival and their departure (hiring and firing) need to be managed skilfully; likewise, the time they spend within the organization must be put to optimum use. To this end, effective management will be concerned, for instance, about occupational health and will institute regular medical checks; it will seek to ensure good morale by the provision of recreational provision and sports facilities; it will promote an explicit corporate concern for the organization's clients through a programme of customer care; it will aim to identify and meet staff training and development needs, and to extend them in new directions. In much the same spirit, it will wish to make comprehensive welfare provision for everyone on the premises.

The value of high quality welfare provision is fully recognized in many large institutions, simply as a matter of good management. Naturally, it is only in the largest of firms that counselling provision can be included, yet it is worth noticing that 'employee counselling' is already coming to be recognized as an established profession with its own formal networks.² Higher education institutions now see themselves as operating, for many purposes exactly like any other large organization, with the same requirements for good management practice. This can be seen, for instance, in the new importance given to training, and particularly in the way that academic staff development and the training needs of ancillary staff, once seen as quite distinct, are beginning to be brought together under one head. For management purposes, the distinct roles occupied by individuals within the institution are often fairly irrelevant. Nowhere is this more obvious than in welfare needs. The likelihood of someone on the premises having an accident, for instance, is no greater for a member of the teaching staff than for a student; in either case the same provision needs to be made. Where creche facilities are available they are sensibly seen as available to students and staff alike. By extension, it can be argued that individuals who are somehow prevented, by some distressing personal circumstances, from fulfilling their roles within the institution, whether that role be teaching, learning or administration, are all entitled to the same consideration and care.

To argue like this is to inaugurate a Copernican revolution in thinking about student support. The issue has usually been framed in terms of how staff can best support students. This approach asks a very different question: how the institution can best ensure that everyone, students and staff alike, is given the help and support they need. The issue shifts from being about the mobilization of one group of people within the institution to help another group, to being about the provision of effective help to all, not because of their specific role or status or position, but simply because they are present in the workplace.

This approach begins from the thought that no businesslike undertaking dare neglect the welfare of either its workforce or its clients. This makes it quite different from any of the three approaches outlined above: the traditional tutoring model starts from moral responsibility; the service model starts from the idea of a professional expert with specialized skills; the curriculum model starts from what might be called an educator's concept of using curricular time to enhance students' life-skills. The workplace welfare model, by contrast, rests on considerations of effectiveness. It derives from good management practice, and embraces the notions of personnel management and customer care. It is, frankly, based on utilitarian rather than humanitarian motives.

Peer support and group-building

Once the point has been made that support is needed not just by students, but by everyone in the institution, staff and students alike, another reformulation suggests itself. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with mobilizing one group to help another group; what is wrong with the traditional tutoring model, under the influence of the idea of pastoral care, and the new service model, under the influence of the idea of counselling, is that they both assume, quite unnecessarily, that help for students comes from staff alone. Yet, of course, students get a great deal of support from each other. Can we not imagine ways in which this might be systematically encouraged?

A generation ago it was quite common in all-female teacher training colleges for incoming students to be attached to a final-year student who was known as their 'college mother'. Her role was initially to help the newcomer to settle in and find her way around, and subsequently to be on hand to help with any personal difficulties. It was hoped that she would develop into a confidante and friend, and undoubtedly the system often worked extremely well. It is hard to imagine the continuance of that system in larger, mixed, pluralistic and multi-purpose institutions of higher education. It carries overtones of paternalism and social control which would now be inappropriate and quite unwelcome in the British context. In the USA such one-to-one pairings are sometimes adopted as 'college buddy' systems. Cultural differences make possible an unselfconscious friendliness which might, in the British context, be simply embarrassing. Yet there may be ways in which the principle of peer support could be effectively applied.

So far as individual peer support is concerned, it can be rendered more acceptable if structured in the form of one-to-one tutorials with a specific *teaching* function. Students who take time to explain something to someone else often find that they come to understand it better themselves. Provision of supplementary tutorials, although ostensibly designed to help students with their studies could have considerable potential for developing relationships within which other kinds of help and support could be offered as well. Many students are, in fact, already greatly helped in this way, quite informally. There are also student-run services, such as 'Nightline', which explicitly offer help with personal difficulties, either by telephone or in a drop-in advice centre.

Rather than attempt to organize artificially induced one-to-one friendships, British higher education institutions have tried to encourage a sense of general group solidarity when students first arrive on campus, usually through some kind of induction programme; often these are best arranged by the students themselves through the Students' Union. Much more could be done by teaching staff to promote peer support within the course itself through the use of group-building exercises early on.

These sorts of activities presuppose a rather different role for teaching staff, as facilitators rather than providers of help and support. They are required to ensure, so far as they can, that each class for which they are responsible becomes a cohesive and mutually supportive group. Of course, this is something which good teachers often do without any special bidding, sometimes without consciously trying, and certainly without thinking of it as something extra they should do, but rather a by-product of creating the kind of atmosphere in which both effective learning and mutual helping are made to seem easy and natural.

In all these ways it is possible to give recognition to the acknowledged fact that a great deal of help which students actually receive comes from other students, something often missed by more traditional models of helping. It is important to see students not simply as problems, but as a major resource. On the whole, British higher education has not been very good at getting students to help each other. The Open University's 'self-help' groups have few parallels elsewhere.

This chapter has muddied the waters somewhat by pointing to some alternative ways in which the provision of student support can be conceptualized.

One is the attempt to offer help and support to the student through the course itself. Increasingly, course units are being devised which aim to help students to develop their study skills, to reflect on their own learning, and to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, all of which echo the aims of the pioneering *University 101* course.

Quite a different approach comes from looking at higher education institutions from a management perspective. On this view, what drives student support is the idea that welfare pays. It is not based on any sort of moral

consideration, as in the tutoring model; nor on the idea of professional expertise, as in the service model; nor on the educator's concept of using curricular time to produce more rounded, more autonomous, more socialized individuals, as in the curriculum model. It is based on the principle that every efficient enterprise will sensibly pay attention to the needs of everyone in the workplace.

Lastly, the recognition that students are all the time helping and supporting each other suggests another approach. From this perspective the task of helping and supporting students could be conceived as one of harnessing this effort, or as tapping this rich resource. We have seen that there are various ways in which institutions might encourage this process of mutual support by helping students to learn to rely on one another.

All these models have now been discussed, and there may well be others. What has been shown is a range of alternatives available to institutions when framing institutional policy. Yet the contradictions here should be noticed. Not only are there obvious tensions between the tutoring model and the service model; there are also tensions between the curriculum model and the models that rely on extra-curricular provision. What is more, there are tensions between the promotion of group solidarity and attention to the needs of vulnerable individuals, and between the mutual support of one student for another and institutional attempts to make use of this. It should be noted, too, that the workplace welfare model (and its associated managerial style which treats students and staff in an identical way) sits uneasily with attempts to build student support into courses, or to give unity and coherence to the whole of the student's experience.

Thus, what is offered here is neither a simple list from which to choose, nor an *à la carte* menu from which various selections may be freely made. Rather, it is an analysis which pulls apart various distinct strands which, in reality, are often tangled together. It can now be seen that institutions have, for the most part, neither adopted a coherent and consistent policy based on one of the models outlined above, nor have they picked their way through the alternatives and developed an eclectic approach of their own. Mostly, they do not appear to have been operating according to any thought-out strategy in this area, with the result that institutional provision has often been ill-considered and unexamined.

In terms of the range of alternative models suggested here, most institutions have been operating a mixed economy, not as the result of making careful choices between various alternatives or weaving them together to form a coherent support structure, but, rather, through the push of traditional assumptions about pastoral care and the pull of more recent suggestions about counselling. This perhaps explains why so much discussion about helping and supporting students continues to be couched in the language of pastoral care and moral responsibility even while institutional practice is increasingly governed by professional requirements on the one hand and utilitarian considerations on the other.

The diversity of institutional provision, with a range of approaches evident

to some degree in almost every higher education institution, may now be seen as evidence of confusion rather than sophistication. All these different approaches represent radically different ways of looking at student support. This suggests that we should resist the temptation to move quickly towards definitive solutions in this area. Rather, we should hope for a period of imaginative experimentation, allowing and encouraging a great deal of diversity of provision. Meanwhile, we should try to open up much more rigorous discussion about the underlying issues. The final chapter of this book seeks to initiate such a discussion by setting out the basic issues as clearly as possible.

Notes

1. Information about University 101 is available from The National Center for the Study of the Freshman Year Experience, 1728 College Street, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, USA. See also Gardner and Jewler (1989).
2. See, for example, the journal *Employee Counselling Today*, launched in 1989, which is available from Employee Assistance Resource, Brunel Science Park, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PQ.

12

Rethinking Student Support

Now that we have a clearer sense of the strengths and weaknesses in conventional approaches to student support and the various kinds of provision that have been made, we can confront afresh the basic questions with a view to drawing some positive conclusions. Do we now have clear answers to the following three questions?

1. Why do students need support at all?
2. What is the responsibility of higher education institutions for student support?
3. How might we now begin to rethink the provision of student support within a higher education institution?

Students' need for support

Students enrol on courses of study to be intellectually stretched. The whole experience of higher education is meant to be stimulating and challenging. Students should not be shielded from the rigours of debate, criticism and controversy; they will not thank us if we wrap them in cotton wool and contrive to ensure that they may undergo the experience without coming to any harm. Risk is of the essence of the experience. A student who is given immunity from risk may, indeed, learn a certain amount, but will not be getting a truly higher education experience. It is a necessary part of this experience that the student is put 'on the spot', challenged to work things out for him or herself, encouraged to live dangerously.

Higher education of this sort will not be experienced as easy. Moreover, because the higher education experience is all of a piece, it will not do to say that one may experiment in the laboratory, but not in one's own personal life, or that one may be riskily creative in the library or in the studio, but not in one's relationships. One of the central purposes of higher education is to encourage students towards increasing autonomy so that they may find their *own* way through problems, both intellectual and personal. It follows that institutions of higher education have an obligation to provide and students

are entitled to expect courses which are both intellectually demanding and personally challenging.

Is there then a fundamental mismatch between the idea of higher education and the idea of support? One offers challenge and risk; the other offers security and safety. Couched in these general terms, it is a fair point and serves as a salutary reminder that there are kinds of support which have no place in the context of higher education. Protectiveness, for instance, can hardly be appropriate where the task is to expose students to uncomfortable facts and difficult ideas.

The question might be restated: How do we balance the elements of support and stimulus? Acknowledging that the task is not simply to offer encouragement and help but to make demands on the student and perhaps even administer some kind of shock in the interests of the student's development, how do we reconcile these apparently conflicting responsibilities? Yet it is not really a matter of reconciling or of balancing. The issue is not about whether the element of challenge in higher education should be in some way modified or mitigated. The higher education experience is bound to be a taxing one for the student and properly so. The point is not to make fewer demands, but to set them in a supportive context.

Students may be invited, for instance, to question everything they have previously learned, but not all at once. The task of teaching involves not protecting or shielding the student, but sensibly sequencing the experiences so that the student is not overwhelmed by trying to tackle too much at once. Tasks are broken down into small steps and risky procedures undertaken one by one, always within a supportive framework that renders them manageable. This is not to compromise either the challenge of higher education or the attention to the needs of the student; both are held together in a teaching process which has to be carefully renegotiated every time. The purpose is to help the student towards maximum autonomy, but to do so within a controlled environment. The teacher's task is to manage the process in such a way that the student is free to explore precisely because the teacher has provided boundary markers that make such exploration safe. They can be let off the leash and allowed to roam freely about the territory, but only because the teacher has chosen relatively safe terrain, where if there are any minefields they are very well signposted.

It has often been noted that the most radical ideas come from those who are most firmly rooted in a tradition. Higher education at its best provides students with platforms of safety and security from which free enquiry can be launched. Students who feel themselves to be standing on solid ground can begin to get a purchase on all kinds of other questions. In due course they may wish to raise further questions. They may ask whether the ground beneath their feet is quite as solid as it at first appeared; they may even wish to see what happens when they cut off the branch they are sitting on. However, none of this would have been possible without security in the earlier stages of enquiry.

Advocates of student support too often seem to want the demands of higher

education to be softened, the experience to be rendered more comfortable. It seems necessary to assert strongly that higher education can be a very uncomfortable process, in which cherished ideas have to be abandoned and old assumptions challenged. It involves the cut and thrust of debate and argument, not just cosy chats with friendly tutors. There can be no compromise on this point.

My argument is quite different. A good and challenging higher education experience necessarily involves an element of careful management of that experience by the teacher, who arranges the challenges according to a structure, following a sequence, against a background or within a frame, all of which is designed to facilitate the student's exploration and learning. By doing this the teacher is supporting the student. Thus, the key to thinking about what support students need is to be found in the very nature of the educational process. To lead students through a jungle of experiences in a way that renders those experiences intelligible is a task which cannot be effectively done without the exercise of care and concern towards the student. Perhaps this is not what is usually meant by pastoral care, but it is care. It is hardly counselling, but it does involve listening to the student, taking the student seriously and treating the student with respect.

Thus a great deal of what students need is actually provided through their courses. Teaching staff have a crucial role in helping and supporting students not by virtue of some extra responsibility for which they may volunteer, but because of the nature of the teaching task. Providing help and support is as much a part of the teacher's role as giving stimulus and challenge. From the student's point of view, a good higher education experience will be one that is both demanding and fulfilling. Ideally, these two strands, far from contradicting each other, will be experienced as indistinguishable, integral to the whole student experience.

But, of course, students have much more straightforward needs as well. If the courses are difficult, so is studying itself. A great deal of self-discipline is required; students are putting themselves to the test. Higher education is almost always highly competitive. Even if there were no element of competition, there would be no escaping the fact that every student is judged against a set of criteria in a social context where a great deal depends on the student's performance and the results are going to be taken as significant for years to come. The rewards of success may be substantial, the consequences of failure unthinkable. It is, by any standards, a recipe for stress.

To this should be added various difficulties which although they have no necessary connection with studying do as a matter of fact beset many students in our society as it is at present. These attendant difficulties, for many if not all students, will compound their problems. There are elements of hardship and strain imposed by the student state itself. As we saw in Chapter 4, by no means all students have financial difficulties, but very many do. The strains of studying are magnified when attempted without adequate resources. To be able to purchase textbooks, photocopy notes or just travel to the library, without always having to consider the cost would be of more help

to many students than any amount of counselling. Possession of a word-processor, or a car, can save precious hours of time for those fortunate enough to have them. Those with young children often have complicated domestic arrangements which enable them to squeeze in a few hours of study at a time, but these arrangements will be precarious, vulnerable to the slightest alteration or breakdown. What has to be put into the equation here is not simply the inconvenience or the occasional absence, but the insecurity of these arrangements. Few of us do our best work in time snatched for study.

These are all rather special needs which are peculiar to students. They are put under pressure by the course and by the whole student experience; in both these respects they are liable to be comprehensively taxed and tested. However, there is a third way in which students need help and support which must not be overlooked. For students are, in many respects, just like everybody else. They have lives outside the lecture room and, indeed, outside the institution, and have needs that are much like everyone else's needs. They get ill; their families and friends have accidents and injuries; their relationships founder; they have difficulty in finding accommodation; their possessions are stolen. Like the rest of the population, too, students are sometimes unwise: they mismanage their affairs; they get into debt; they drink too much. Sometimes it may justly be said that they have brought their problems upon themselves. Nonetheless, they need help and support in these circumstances.

One can conclude this section, then, by saying that students require support partly because anyone needs support as they go through life and especially when going through a big change, and partly because as students they are subject to some unusually difficult pressures, some of which are contingent upon being a student and others of which are inherent in the activity of studying at degree level. Yet in all these areas the *kind* of support they need is not that which removes the element of challenge or in any way reduces or even compensates for it, but that which tries to ensure that the difficulties are met, managed and used as learning experiences.

The institution's responsibility for provision

As we have seen, there are different traditions as to how much responsibility higher education institutions should take for providing help and support to students. The oldest traditions of British higher education stem from institutions which took full responsibility for their students' lives. However, the model of an enclosed, self-sufficient institution no longer fits the institutions we have. Few students today (and very few staff) live their lives within the institution. Reconsideration of this issue is long overdue.

The present position is inconsistent, some institutions making more extensive welfare provision than others. However, there is a discernible trend to look increasingly to the wider community for resources which were once provided specifically for students and handled by the institution itself. Two examples will serve to illustrate this: medical care and student accommodation.

There is some kind of medical service in virtually every institution of any size. However, whereas some years ago it was not uncommon to find institutions employing nurses of their own (and doctors in some cases) and even providing quite extensive sick-bay facilities, these arrangements have mostly been dismantled, and in some cases the medical services have been privatized. Many students will, in any case, register with a local medical practice and attend its surgery like anyone else. For the institution to provide, on campus, a comprehensive medical service (sometimes complete with beds allowing overnight stay in what was effectively a mini-hospital) now seems unnecessary and inappropriate, as well as expensive and wasteful.

Provision of student accommodation has likewise shifted from a situation where many institutions provided residential accommodation for a substantial proportion of their students to one in which most students now find their own accommodation, with or without assistance from the institution. While few institutions have actually reduced the number of residential places they can offer and some have undertaken considerable expansion, the rapid growth of higher education has meant that, overall, only quite a small proportion of students are accommodated in halls of residence. There has been a significant switch to self-catering and a growing reliance on private landlords and local housing associations. Institutions which once felt they had to make substantial provision for students' accommodation needs are inclined to leave much more to the students to arrange for themselves. Staff once employed primarily to allocate residential places are now busy putting students in touch with local landlords who have private flats to rent. What was once quite a close supervision of the residential life of the institution has become part of the institution's routine administration.

While in these two instances one could perhaps see evidence that an institution was shedding certain responsibilities, there are other student services which seem to be relatively free from this sort of pressure. Few doubt the need for institutionally based careers advice, for instance, or for an on-campus counselling service. However, the issue has to be faced: much of what institutions provide by way of student support appears to be indistinguishable from or to overlap with what is already provided in the local community. Specific provision, paid for and controlled by the institution, has to be justified on the grounds:

1. that it offers something which is not available elsewhere;
2. that students' needs are significantly different from those of the rest of the population;
3. that students are entitled to a better service than is available elsewhere;
4. that a service is needed which relates closely to the rest of the student's experience.

Of these, the last is the best argument and it is the one emphasized here.

It is worth noticing that, if one were to take the view that higher education institutions should simply declare that the students must make their own arrangements in these matters, and that it is none of the institution's

business, one would be colluding with those who insist on seeing student support as dealing with problems, and as something quite detached from the main task of higher education institutions. The line I have taken is quite the opposite: first, student support is not just about dealing with problems, but concerns students' ongoing development as individuals and their social relationships; and second, the task of helping and supporting students is not just ancillary to what higher education institutions are about, but a central, integral feature of their task.

The reasons just given as to why students need to be supported at all suggest a way of thinking about this. We may imagine a student of, say, history being subject to pressures of various kinds. Some of these are to do with the actual discipline being studied which imposes certain requirements, certain challenges; some are to do with the business of being a student, which involves set timetables and deadlines, decisions about courses and career choices; and some are to do with the normal business of life, which inevitably involves the surmounting of all kinds of obstacles such as illness, bereavement, having too few friends, or too many, sorting out priorities and so on. The student needs to be helped and supported through all these kinds of challenges.

Should an institution of higher education attempt to make comprehensive provision for every conceivable eventuality? Perhaps not. The following three points can now be quite firmly stated:

1. There are some aspects of the student support task which can only be satisfactorily provided for within the institution, since they are integral to the teaching itself. Support in this sense is the flip-side of intellectual challenge and only separable from it with considerable cost to the quality of the higher education experience.
2. There are other aspects of student support which would normally be much better provided on campus (e.g. academic or careers advice), since they probably require specialist help of a kind that might not be available elsewhere.
3. Support with personal or domestic problems, and help with ongoing personal development, may often be readily available elsewhere and may quite easily be provided off-campus for students who live in the community. Yet even here, either because the necessary help is not, in fact, available or because the institution considers it can offer a more specifically targeted service, a higher education institution may decide to make arrangements of its own. Besides, there remains one overwhelming reason for encouraging higher education institutions to make comprehensive provision, which is that these needs are rarely neatly separable. For instance, personal anxieties, career choices and intellectual difficulties may often be tangled up together. In fact, the chances are that they will be.

We have to conclude, therefore, that every institution of higher education must provide type 1 support, should if possible provide type 2 and may well provide some of type 3. In other words, some kinds of institutional provision

are essential, some are desirable and others, admittedly optional, are often justified, not least because of the interrelatedness of the different aspects of the student's experience.

Rethinking institutional provision

The recognition that students need support and that institutions should provide much of it does not of course commit institutions to any particular *type* of provision. It is inevitable that the question will be asked: why not provide all support centrally, and put it in the hands of professionals who have been properly trained for it and who are given specific responsibility for it? Teaching staff would then be free to teach.

The issue about institutional provision, however, goes far beyond questions about the balance between tutorial support and professional support services. It is true that most institutions currently rely on this kind of dual provision; but these twin-track arrangements both reflect and serve to reinforce the polarization in our thinking, between ideas of pastoral care and ideas of counselling, which has been identified as one of the major problems in this area. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the ideologies themselves influencing the analysis.

The crucial decision for institutions is how far they are committed to making integrated provision in which support is understood as part and parcel of the educational experience of students, and how far they are content to provide an ancillary support service. The point is not simply about the balance of provision, but about the underlying educational philosophy. My view is that rethinking support provision must mean bringing it into line with the institution's policies and priorities, rather than leaving it on one side as if it had nothing much to do with the institution's mission. Of course, if support is seen as integral to the teaching function then it is likely that tutors rather than the professional support staff will move centre stage.

This is not, of course, to argue that student support should be in the hands of tutors only, but it *is* to invert the common assumption that tutors in their support role simply do amateurishly what counsellors do properly. On the contrary, there is good reason to claim that within an educational institution it is the tutor who, when all is going as it should, does the whole job, the role of support staff being ancillary, concentrating on specific parts of it. Furthermore, it is misleading to say that specialist services are provided *centrally* within an institution. What is centrally provided is the day-to-day support through tutors; what specialists provide is necessarily peripheral. This needs to be stated quite bluntly, since what is at stake is our conception of the institution's task. An institution which has teaching students at the heart of its mission needs to affirm, both in its policies and in its structures, that tutors are the front line who carry this mission forward. It is confusing, as well as demoralizing for tutors, when ancillary units are described as 'central' provision. Tutors sometimes find themselves colluding with this kind of

description, thereby implicitly consigning not just themselves, but the tutorial task to the institution's margin.

I want to affirm that tutors have a key role to play in supporting students, and one which, despite its long and distinguished pedigree, is sometimes undervalued. The explanation for this lies partly in the awkward tension, which has already been discussed, between ideas of pastoral care and ideas of counselling. Tutors do not have to move into a counselling role in order to help their students; they are already helping them as tutors. This kind of reference to counselling, besides doing scant justice to counselling itself, devalues the tutorial function.

A great deal of the normal work of tutors consists of helping and supporting students. If we conceive the educational experience as one of being stretched, as in physical exercise, then tutors who manage that experience for their students have a concern to ensure *both* that the student is exercised sufficiently *and* that the student is not hurt. So supporting students is not an additional thing that tutors do when they are not teaching them; it is a way of so managing the learning process that students are both challenged and sustained. To put it another way, students may sometimes be helped as much by the rescheduling of their work deadlines as by extra tuition. Both are examples of the tutor operating professionally as a support to students.

Higher education institutions which understand the education process in this kind of way will want to regard the tutor's work as the central core of the help and support given to students, while recognizing that the student has many other sources of help and support, and that the student's experience may include other matters which are of no relevance to the educational encounter with the tutor. Seen like this, the tutor's role in support is inseparable from the tutor's role in teaching; good teaching is always supportive.

From the tutor's perspective the task can be seen as one. However, from the vantage point of an ancillary support service it will inevitably look different, since that kind of structure must always deal, and rightly, with students' problems which, as we saw right at the beginning, constitute only *part* of the task of helping and supporting students. The tutorial context provides a much wider perspective on the whole student experience. This has implications for institutional policy. For instance, to administer and co-ordinate the work of personal tutors from within a student support unit, as is done in some institutions, while clearly indicating that student support is to be seen as a whole, is nonetheless bound to colour how the support role is perceived – to label it, in effect, as a kind of counselling.

To move the tutor to centre stage represents an important bit of re-thinking, but it leaves a great deal undone. Students have many different needs, only some of which have anything to do with their educational experience. Only when these impact upon the student's work, or affect the student's attendance, or impair the student's ability to meet course requirements, do they become part of the tutor's brief. This enables us to draw a fairly clear line around the tutor's role, with a good deal left outside it. Meanwhile, as we become clearer about the tutor's role we come to realize

that much of it is about quite humdrum tasks; like, for instance, noticing when students are absent, and knowing every student well enough to be able to write him or her a job reference. These are not just little jobs which have to be done on top of everything else; they are what being a tutor *is*.

There is no reason for tutors to feel that their role is vague or ill-defined, with no clear boundaries; its main thrust is quite clear. Its focus is the day-to-day running of things in an educational establishment. It is *not* about having long heart-to-heart talks with individual students – not normally, routinely or regularly. In so far as these are necessary, specific provision must be made. So to recognize the centrality of the tutor's role is not to diminish the importance of support staff; quite the opposite. If the tutor's role is understood to be firmly locked into the central concerns of the institution, then the ready availability of staff who are relatively detached and independent of the basic structure, and to whom referrals can be made for specific purposes, becomes of paramount importance.

Finally, then, we must ask what bearing this rethinking has on the kind of student support arrangements that might be made. Can we construct an agenda for a higher education institution?

First, and most crucially, the institution has to decide to what extent it is ready to commit itself to a conception of education that embraces support, as outlined here, so that student support becomes an integral part of its educational mission.

Second, the institution needs to determine what it wants of its tutors. What is their role and responsibility, both in relation to students (e.g. treating them as adults, as 'whole', as 'worthy', 'worth bothering with') and in relation to support staff (e.g. are they there to provide a 'safety-net', a 'back-up', or what?).

Third, the institution will want to establish among tutors a clear sense of what is rightly belonging to their role and what is not. Tutors should understand that they are *not* being asked to undertake either pastoral care or counselling; there is no moral requirement for them to be extra-caring in their relationships with students, nor any technical requirement to be highly skilled in interpersonal interaction. What is required is that they be professionally concerned to tutor well. An institution which is as concerned for its staff as for its students will not want tutoring seen as an open-ended commitment, but will endeavour to make the tutoring task as clear and straightforward as possible. It will reward performance in this role in a way that corresponds with its public statements about its importance.

Fourth, in the light of this, the institution will need to undertake a radical review of its support services. This will necessitate looking closely at what students' problems actually are and then shaping the service round the problems. There is a real risk of the opposite happening, of problems falling into the shape of existing provision, unless this danger is recognized and steps taken to guard against it. If there are a lot of debt problems, for instance, serious consideration might be given to the appointment of a debt counsellor or financial adviser. However, care would be needed to ensure

that the problems were correctly identified, and especially to check that existing patterns of provision did not distort by individualizing or medicalizing what in other contexts would be recognized as social problems. It might well be that the profile of student problems indicated a need for a social worker in the team rather than, say, a counsellor.

Fifth, the institution will want to encourage tutors and support staff to experiment. The alternatives suggested in the previous chapter indicate some lines for development and exploration. As has been shown, there is a great deal of confusion in the area of student support and, although some principles seem to be clear, there is still a great deal of room for different approaches to co-exist.

Last, the institution will want to find some way of developing this whole area of work so that it can be seen as a key element in the general educational task. One reason why research in this area is so under-developed is that the necessary conceptual frameworks have yet to be established.

In this book I have tried to mark out the territory in a distinctive way, drawing heavily on my own experience of combining two roles often kept separate, and ranging across a number of different institutional contexts. In laying some foundations in relation to the social science disciplines, I am conscious that my approach might appear somewhat idiosyncratic; I do not expect what I have written to stand as a definitive statement. My hope is, however, that I may have opened up this area and claimed it as properly belonging to the study of education, not simply psychology or counselling.

While it has to be recognized that students' problems are becoming more like everyone else's problems, and may have to be dealt with in much the same way, it does not follow that helping and supporting students is just like helping and supporting anyone else. If the support provision available within an institution were virtually indistinguishable from that publicly available to all, then the only justification for making duplicate provision would be the sheer weight of student need. I have insisted that, on the contrary, there is something distinctive about the help and support students need *as students*, and that there is something distinctive that tutors can offer *as tutors*.

This is in one sense a very traditional view, for it is to return student support to its place *within*, rather than alongside, the educational process. Yet against the current tendency to think of student support almost exclusively as counselling, it may appear a quite radical proposal, offering a broad vision of the educational enterprise, with support right at the centre.

Currently, policies remain piecemeal. There is much fussing over defining roles and monitoring procedures, but no clear sense of what is at stake here. Student support seems marginal to the main thrust of what higher education is about. My purpose has been to challenge that. I want to shift the argument away from the question of how best to provide safety-nets for those who fall, and onto the question of how to enhance the quality of the whole student experience. I want to focus attention not on how academic staff should

conduct personal tutorials, but on how students can be both supported and challenged within a tutorial relationship. I want to move away from questions about how students may be given 'pastoral care' by staff who are supposedly older and wiser, or how they may be given 'counselling' by staff who are specially trained and appropriately skilled in techniques of helping, and to pose as sharply as I can the question of how we can develop a shared sense of purpose which binds together all our teaching, learning *and helping* into a coherent educational philosophy.

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Index

- academic potential
 - anxiety about, 10
- accommodation
 - difficulties with, 3, 127
 - help with, 104
 - in college, 35, 103
 - provision of, 92–4, 105, 127–8
 - cf. Britain and USA, 106
 - (*see also* residential experience)
- adjustment, 23, 28–32 *passim*
 - as a metaphor of change, 24–6, 31
- adolescence, 12–15 *passim*, 20
- adult development, 12–13, 15
- adulthood, 12, 19
 - development towards, 14, 20
 - preparation for, 12, 15
- adults
 - students as, 12, 81, 85, 107, 132
- advice, 86, 101, 108–9
- advocate
 - the tutor's role as, 52, 71, 82, 86
- agenda
 - for a higher education institution, 132–3
 - student's 'hidden' agenda, 59
 - tutorial agenda, 58–9, 118
- 'amateur tradition', 52, 101
- ancillary provision, 95, 97–8, 113, 117, 129–31
- Arbuckle, D.S., 57
- assessment
 - as part of tutor's role, 52–3, 76, 107
 - as structuring the student's experience, 16
 - internalization of, 20
 - of student's 'moral status', 57
 - student's self-assessment, 58, 118
 - (*see also* examinations)
- Astin, A.W., 16
- Bannister, D., 30
- Barnett, R., 36, 42n
- Becker, H.S., 30
- becoming a student, 23, 26–8
- Blyth, W.A.L., 27
- boundaries, 81–3 *passim*, 84, 132
- Bramley, W., 56
- British tradition, 45, 102–6 *passim*, 117, 127
- career, 13, 15, 17, 23, 114, 116
 - concept of, 30–1
 - decisions about, 3–4, 6, 14, 19, 83, 129
 - tutor's career jeopardized, 50–1
 - (*see also* student career)
- careers advice, 104, 114, 128–9
- advisers, 98, 109, 111
- advisory service, 92, 104, 114
- chaplaincy, 53, 75, 92, 109
- Chickering, A.W., 16
- colleagues, 74, 81–2
- community, 115
 - academic, 39, 42n
 - collegiate, 35, 103, 105
 - local, 128
 - therapeutic, 80, 85
- confidential information, 52, 74–6
- (*see also* sensitive information)
- confidentiality, 53, 68–77 *passim*
 - five-dimensional model of, 73–4
 - cf. privacy and secrecy, 71–2

- Corbett, J., 37, 42n
 counselling, 80, 110, 119
 as a model of helping, 108–11
 pastoral care and, 75, 82, 102, 120,
 122, 130–2
 service, 53, 98, 115, 128, 134
 cf. interviewing, 56, 58, 79–80
 cf. tutoring, 56–8, 79–80, 109–10,
 120
 counsellor, 41, 75, 110
 cf. tutor, 52–3, 80
 Course Tutor, 45–7, 70
 curriculum
 support provision via the, 115–20
 passim, 120–2
- Danziger, K., 24, 30
 debt, 41, 132
 indebtedness, 10
 (*see also* financial difficulties; poverty)
 demand-led, 97
 Departments of Student Services, 104,
 113
 dependency, 9–10, 65–7, 82, 108
 Derricott, R., 27
 development
 as a social process, 14, 20, 129
 interrelated processes of, 13, 15,
 19–20
 of personal skills and qualities, 16–17
 professional, 17–19
 stages of, 14, 26
 student, 12–13, 15–17, 19–20
 through the life course, 12–13
 disclosure
 levels of, 72, 74
 self, 61–2
 Durkheim, E., 28
- Earwaker, J.C., 17–18, 46
 Eisenstadt, S.N., 40
 Europe, 101
 examination board, 70, 76, 82
 examinations, 10, 16, 62, 69
 worry about, 23, 41, 107
 (*see also* stress)
 expectations, 26–7, 29, 30, 32
 lack of clear, 8
 misleading, 38
 pressure to conform to others', 19
- financial
 adviser, 132
 assistance, 76n
 difficulties, 73, 126
 sacrifices, 23
 support, 4, 6–7, 9
 worries, 9
 (*see also* debt; poverty)
 first year experience, 117
 First Year Tutor, 46, 51
 Fransella, F., 30
 freshman seminar, 116–17
 friends, 35, 39, 61
 as a problem, 129
 as a source of support, 23, 54, 120–1
 friendship between tutors and
 students, 55, 86
 Frith, S., 40
- Gahagan, J., 60
 gender, 10, 61
 Goffman, E., 30
 group-building, 121
 growing up, 15, 27
- Hammersley, H., 28
 harassment, 47, 63–4, 67
 helping, 64
 not experienced as helpful, 7
 paradox of, 65–6
 helplessness, 65–6
 higher education
 availability of, 36–7
 entry to, 23, 26, 28
 leaving, 25–6, 28
 wider access to, 20, 37
 home
 difficulty of definition, 39
 homesickness, 9, 24, 41
- identity, 19, 31–2
 academic, 17
 negotiation of, 29
 professional, 17
 transition as a threat to, 24
 ideology, 106–8, 111, 130
 inequalities, 9, 37
 institutional climate, 76
 institutions (of higher education)

- changed character of, 3, 35–9, 41,
 113, 115, 120
 commitment to student welfare, 117
 effect on tutorial relationship, 53, 55,
 63–4
 impact on student experience, 27–8,
 30, 32
 policies of, 122, 131
 provision made by, 92–5, 101–6
passim, 113–15
 responsibility for student support, 80,
 85, 91, 124, 127–30
 support for tutors, 50–1, 132
 tutors' responsibility to, 45, 82, 84, 86
 integral provision, 97–8, 117, 129–30
 integration, 111
 interviewing, 56–8, 79
- Jaques, D., 56
- Kaye, K., 20
- Laing, R.D., 31
 Lemons, L.J., 16
 Lewis, R., 56
 listening, 78–9, 114, 126
 loss, 25
 low status of support role, 51
 low take-up, 97
 Lublin, J., 56
- McMahon, T., 56
 management of the tutorial, 59–66
passim
 Marris, P., 25
 medical service, 128
 Merton, R.K., 28
 Milgram, S., 64
 models of student support, 113, 115,
 120–2
 moral aspects, 67, 111, 113, 120, 122,
 132
 Moral Tutor, 102, 104
 Morton, S., 118
- negotiation, 32
 between self and role, 29–30, 32
 of personal development, 19
 North America, 101
 (*see also* USA)
- occupational socialization, 17
 Olesen, V.L., 16, 21n
 'open door' policy, 52
- pastoral care, 101–14 *passim*, 117, 120,
 122, 126
 and counselling, 75, 82, 130–2, 134
 as a model of helping, 106–8
- Pattison, S., 106
 peer support, 120–1
 permission
 levels of, 72, 74
 Perry, W.G., 16
 Personal Tutor, 45–6, 86, 97, 107, 131
 personal tutorial, 79, 97–9, 104, 106,
 113–14
 personality
 concept of, 24–6, 31
 Phillips, M., 76n
 Placement Tutor, 46
 policy questions, 95
 ancillary or integral provision?, 97–8
 initiatives or responses?, 96–7
 prevention or cure?, 95–6
 portfolios, 16, 118
 poverty, 40–1
 (*see also* debt; financial difficulties)
- power, 61–5 *passim*
 privacy, 71–2, 106, 113
 of student, 53, 61, 70
 of tutor, 81
- problems, 3–11 *passim*, 95–7, 117–18,
 129, 131–3
 contribution to personal development,
 20
 identification of, 6
 initial, 8
 students as, 121
 tutors', 107
 typical student, 9–11
- professional responsibility, 63, 74–6
 (*see also* tutor, responsibilities of)
- 'professional tradition', 101
 professionalism, 52, 113
 professionalization
 deferred, 18
 incremental, 18
 instant, 17
 provision (of student support), 94–9
passim, 123–4

- (*see also* institutions, provision made by)
- Rees, S., 57
- referral, 53, 76, 83–6, 119, 132
 reasons for, 79, 84
- relationships, 59–68 *passim*, 79–81, 85
 as a source of support, 31
 in interviewing and counselling, 79
 personal vs professional, 80
 (*see also* tutorial relationship)
- residential experience, 104–5, 112n
 (*see also* accommodation)
- resources, 82, 98–9
- Richmond, D.R., 16
- rite of passage, 14, 26–7
- Robinson, D., 26
- Rogers, C., 31, 56
- role
 concept of, 26–7, 30–1
 cf. roles of tutor and counsellor, 80
 (*see also* tutor's role)
- role strain, 51–5, 76
- safety-net, 96, 98, 117, 132–3
- Scotland, 112n
- secrecy, 70–2
- Seligman, M., 65
- sensitive information, 68–71 *passim*, 76
 passing on, 85
 (*see also* confidential information)
- sensitivity
 levels of, 72–3
- service
 as a model of student support, 113, 120–2
- social workers, 57, 75, 133
- socialization
 as a metaphor of change, 23, 26–9
passim, 30–1
 occupational, 17
- 'sophomore slump', 16
- Steele, R.A., 118
- Stern, D., 60
- Strauss, A., 29
- stress, 22, 31
 in student life, 3, 126
 in tutor's role, 51
 related to examinations, 9, 16, 19
- Strong, P.M., 57
- student career, 11, 17, 19, 37
- student development, 12–13, 15–17, 19–20
- student experience, 12, 30, 127, 131, 133
 changed meaning of, 28
 changing, 33–42 *passim*
 differences in, 41
 interrelatedness of aspects of, 130
 quality of, 133
 social dimension of, 20, 91, 108
- student life, 20, 33
- students
 hard to help, 84–5
 home-based, 23, 112n
 mature, 3, 9, 12–13, 22, 27, 32
 non-traditional, 32, 37
 older, 107
 overseas, 3, 8, 32
 under-prepared, 10
- students' union, 36, 121
- support
 agencies of, 53–4
 responsibility for providing, 127–30
 students' need for, 124–7
 tutors' need for, 75, 82
 support networks, 8, 23, 84
- support services, 132
 professional, 99, 114, 130
 specialist, 95
- teaching styles
 discontinuities of, 8
- Tinto, V., 25–6
- transition, 22–32
 as a metaphor of change, 24, 29–31
 coping with, 22–3
 positive features of, 22
- Turner, G., 28
- tutor
 ambivalence of, 111
 commitment of, 46, 84, 132
 confusion of, 46, 51, 83–4
 meaning of word, 45
 responsibilities of, 41, 52–3, 59–63, 65–6, 81–2 *passim*
 (*see also* professional responsibility)
 support for, 51, 53, 82
- tutor-counsellor, 94

- tutor's role, 51–5 *passim*, 78–87 *passim*,
131–2
 as advocate, 52, 71, 82, 86
 as counselling, 82, 114, 130–2
 as friend, 55, 86
 as pastoral care, 82, 131–2
 boundaries of, 81–4 *passim*, 132
 central, 131–2
 distinct, 109, 133
 front-line, 78–9, 130
sui generis, 82
 cf. counsellor, 53, 75, 80, 84
 cf. priest, 75
- tutorial
 academic, 79
 agenda of, 58–9, 118
 course-related, 118
 management of, 59–63, 65–6
 one-to-one, 103, 121
 (*see also* personal tutorial)
 tutorial relationship, 55–68 *passim*, 79,
86, 97, 133
 dependency in, 65–7, 82
 meeting tutor's own needs through, 82
 'moral' aspects of, 67, 111, 113, 120,
122, 132
 power in, 61–5 *passim*
 tutorial support, 109, 130
 tutoring, 46–51 *passim*, 109, 117, 132
 as a model of student support, 120–2
 cf. counselling, 56–8, 79–80, 109–10,
120
 cf. doctor-patient, 56–7
 cf. interviewing, 56–8, 79–80
 cf. pastoral care, 109, 120
 cf. social worker-client, 57
 (*see also* tutorial, management of)
- 'University 101', 116–7, 121, 123n
 USA, 106, 110, 117, 120
 (*see also* North America)
- Van Gennep, 25
 vulnerability, 61–2
- welfare, 96, 111, 117, 121, 127
 workplace welfare as an approach to
 student support, 119–20
 Whittaker, E.W., 16, 21n
- Year Tutor, 45–7
 youth culture, 40

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This book offers a critical review of the various kinds of help and support which institutions of higher education provide for their students. John Earwaker begins by looking at students, their problems, their development, and the way they cope with transitions; these are all to be understood in an interpersonal and social context. He then examines the tutorial relationship, drawing out some of the difficulties and ambiguities in the tutor's role. Finally, he offers an explanation for some of the uncertainty in this area, and sets a new agenda for the future. His recurring theme is that helping students is not some kind of 'extra' which may be tacked on as a supplement to the educational experience but is an integral element in the educational process.

John Earwaker is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Further and Higher Education within the School of Education, Sheffield City Polytechnic. He has worked in higher education for 24 years, lecturing in Education and in Social Studies. He has combined his teaching responsibilities with the role of Polytechnic Chaplain. This book originated from a period of secondment during which he conducted an investigation into tutorial support throughout his own institution. He is now engaged in staff development and training, and in running an MA course in Further and Higher Education. He has written many articles in both theological and educational journals, including several recent papers on the theme of this book.

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