Essentials of Being a Teaching Assistant in Informatics

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Schedule

- What are the responsibilities of a teaching assistant (TA)?
- Developing course material:
  - What have you been required to do?
  - How do you decide on what new content to include?
  - Considering the bigger picture of course design.
  - Some tips for clear and useful content
- Supporting students:
  - What kinds of support are you required to offer? What are the limits of your responsibility?
  - Tips and tricks
  - Other sources of support

What are the responsibilities of a TA?

Take a few minutes to discuss your responsibilities in small groups…

TA Responsibilities (Informatics Teaching Support Policy)

- Some or all of the following:
  - Designing assessed/unassessed coursework
  - Designing tutorial material
  - Preparing slides and lecture notes
  - Creating and updating course information materials
  - Answering course-related student queries
  - Occasional delivery/support in delivery of lectures
  - Other similar support duties if mutually agreed

TA Responsibilities

In reality, may also involve tutoring, demonstrating and/or marking duties. For these, have a look at the slides and references from the other 'Essentials' training sessions from the Informatics Teaching Support training webpage or Learn.

TA responsibilities (Inf Teaching Support Policy)

- Monitoring your hours of work and submitting online weekly timesheets to the Informatics Student Services (ISS)
- **Hours of TA work + hours for other roles + hours in Inf training = hours paid**
- If you think you might exceed your allocated hours, raise this with the course lecturer who will report to the ISS
- **DO NOT work extra hours until you get permission from the ISS (normally for max 15% extra) as you may not get paid for them!**

Developing course material

Take a few minutes to discuss in small groups:

- What were you asked to do?
- What information influences your decision of the content to include?
- What preparation steps do you take to acquire this information?

Some preparation steps for deciding on content

- Discuss with the course organiser (CO) about his/her requirements and the course:
  - Aims and objectives
  - Prerequisites
  - Format and organisation
  - Student profiles
  - The content of other course components, how they work together
  - Experience from past years (what worked/not, student difficulties)
- Have a look at the course website and the course material.
- Discuss with colleagues from the course team
- Do any revision and reading that is necessary

The bigger picture of course design

- Is important to consider such that the content that you develop ***aligns with other course dimensions.***
- Learning and teaching is driven in many countries by a curricula based on ***aims and learning outcomes.***
- The ***theory of constructive alignment (Biggs 2003)*** is a widely adopted curricular framework; main ideas:
  - The learner should be seen at the centre of learning and teaching; **what he/she does is important!**
  - Aims and learning outcomes, learning & teaching activities and assessment should be aligned to provide transparency.

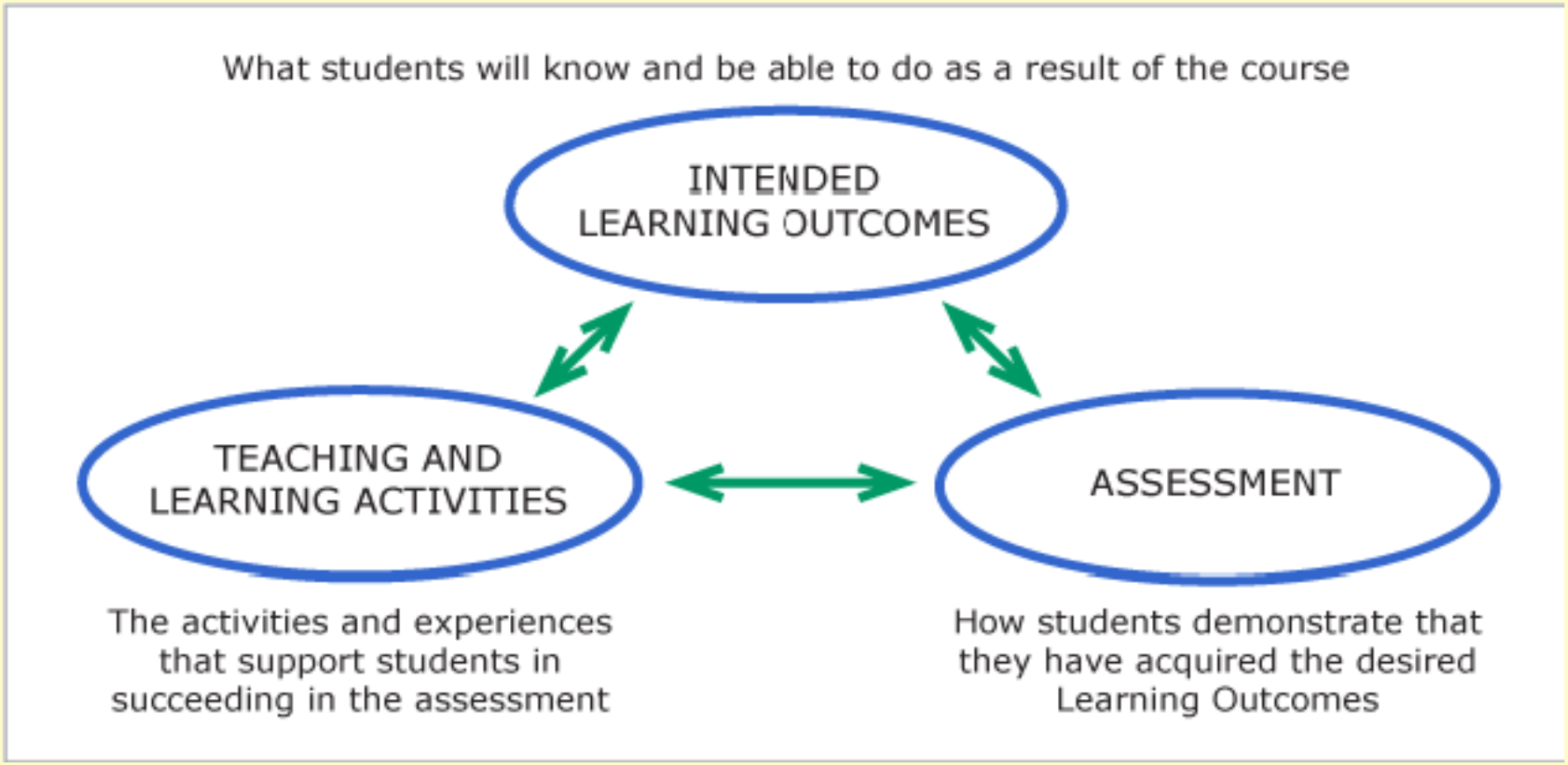
Focus on aims and learning outcomes

- **Aims** = broad statements defining the purpose of a course, module or learning activity; written from the perspective of the teacher (enable, support, facilitate, etc.)
- **Learning outcomes** = specific statements about the observable effects of the course, module or learning activity on students, i.e. what the students should know or be able to do; written from the perspective of the students (discuss, describe, calculate, etc.)
- Learning outcomes should be SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic & relevant, time limited

Focus on aims and learning outcomes

Individually, access your course's Informatics drps webpage and have a look at the course learning outcomes

The Theory of Constructive Alignment (Biggs 2003)



(Adapted from Biggs 2003)

Some tips for clear and useful content in lectures/labs/tutorials

1. Keep clear links to learning outcomes to help students towards achieving their learning goals.
2. Keep clear links to assessment such that there is a clear progression and the opportunity to practice for students.
3. Start from learning outcomes, setting more detailed ones if necessary, and NOT from what you know!
4. Tailor the content (level, quantity, language) to the students!
5. Pay more attention to topics which posed problems in past years or which you anticipate may pose problems.
6. Have a plan for evaluating your content, and change it if necessary.

Some tips for writing coursework instructions

- Keep clear links to learning outcomes, as assessment should be the opportunity to prove their achievement
- Keep clear links to the content and methods used for other course components to be fair
- Develop a marking scheme in conjunction with the instructions, and make sure that it gives more credit to important learning outcomes and less to less important ones.
- Tailor what is required (quantity, difficulty) to the students and their results in past assignments (but consult CO first!)
- Be open to improve the language/explanations if confusing
- Use coursework results to evaluate the instructions, and improve them if necessary

General tips for developing course material

- Consult with the CO before making any decisions
- Get his/her approval for any new content before providing it to the students
- Collaborate with the CO and course colleagues to ensure consistency between the content and methods of other course components (lectures, tutorials, labs)
- The different course components should complete each other to help students towards achieving the learning outcomes

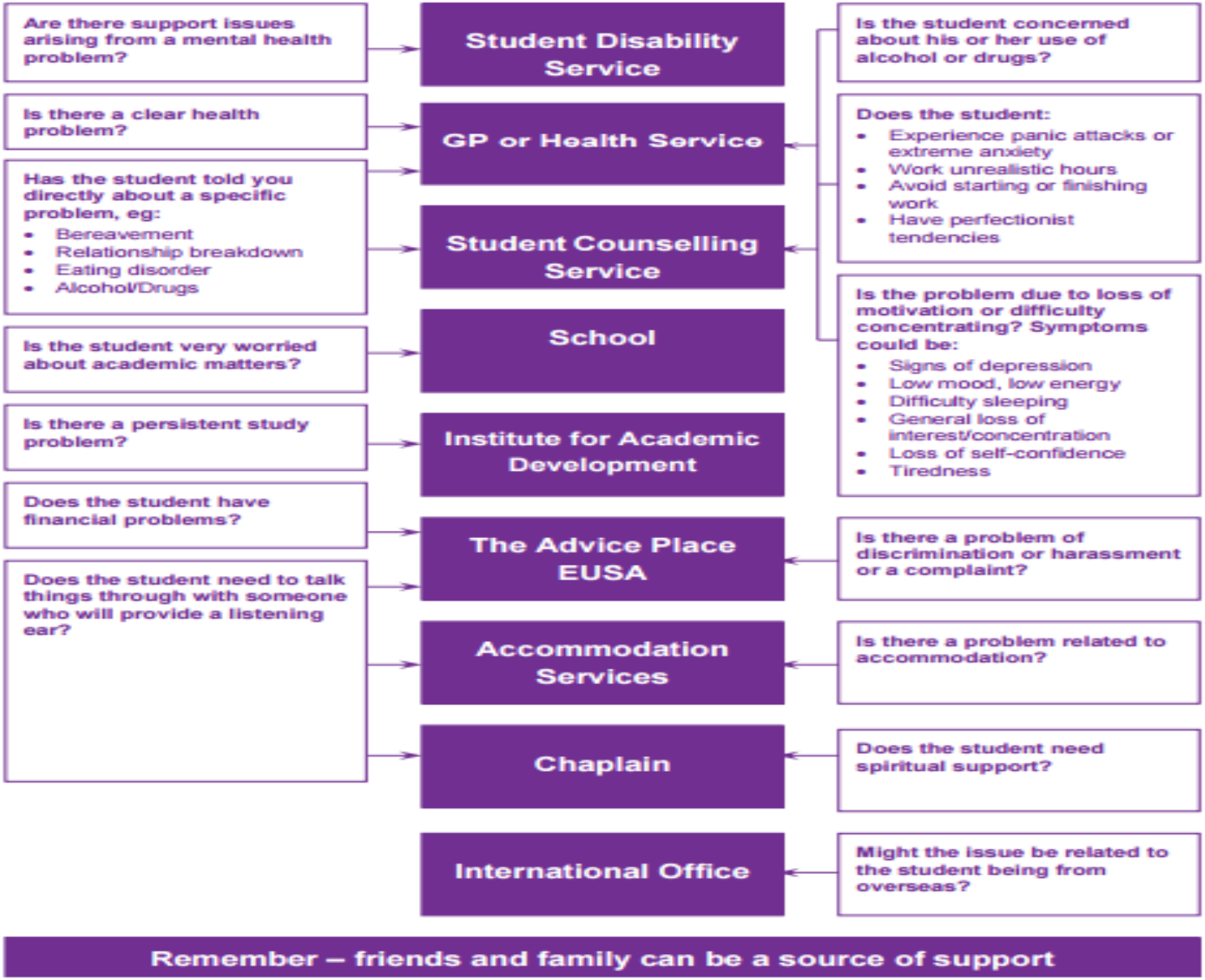
What kind of student support are you required to offer, and where does it end?

In groups, take a few minutes to discuss:

- Your support responsibilities
- The limit of these responsibilities
- Other sources of support in the university

Some general support tips

- If you act as a tutor/demonstrator , it is your role to offer academic support to students in class
- Advise students on the content of the course, but also on how they could develop their skills and study effectively
- Be open to provide advice also outside of tutorial/lab times; clarify early with the students how they should contact you (e.g. office hours, email, after class)
- If you must advise students online (e.g. wikis), clarify with the CO the extent of this responsibility
- For personal matters, refer students to more specialised sources of support (new Policy)



(taken from "Helping distressed students" guide)

Resources

- Informatics Teaching Support
- Informatics Teaching Support Staff Policy
- Informatics Teaching Support training webpage
- **For developing course material:**
  - "Designing courses", "Designing and delivering lectures" material on the **"IAD Resources on Tutoring and Demonstrating" channel in Learn**
  - IAD course "Designing and Delivering Lectures", Wed 7th Nov
- **For supporting students:**
  - "Tutoring and Demonstrating: a Handbook" chapter 7 ("Supporting and Advising Students")
  - Disability Service's "Supporting Students" and the "Helping distressed students" guide for staff

Resources

- University Student Services
- "Advising students on personal and academic matters" material on the **"IAD Resources on Tutoring and Demonstrating" channel in Learn**