Supporting Students Beyond the Course

Cristina Adriana Alexandru
(Cristina.Alexandru@ed.ac.uk)
In previous sessions, we have seen…

• What student support responsibilities tutors, demonstrators and TAs have, and their limits
• What tutors could do to help students develop study skills in order to prevent poor presentation, incomplete work and plagiarism in coursework
• Briefly, how tutors and demonstrators could help students develop problem solving skills
• An enumeration of some sources of support in our university
Schedule

- Presentation by Iris Sloan from the Student Counselling Service:
  - Our responsibilities
  - What is mental health?
  - Responding to distress
  - Boundaries and confidentiality
  - How to contact the Student Counselling Service

- Presentation by Janet Gardiner from the Student Disability Service:
  - The services offered by the Student Disability Service
  - Different types of disabilities, learning difficulties and mental health conditions
  - How to behave with students having them
Schedule

- Why is support beyond the contents of the course important for students?
- Support boundaries
- **Academic support** - How can we help students develop their study and related skills, especially if relevant for assignments? What do the Personal Tutoring System and Institute for Academic Development (IAD) offer?
- **Personal support** - Which university services should we direct students to? Focus on those which are more relevant to us.
- General tips and tricks for responding to support requests
Why is support beyond the contents of the course important for students?

- Students need knowledge, but also **academic and related transferrable skills** in order to solve complex tasks in labs, tutorials, assignments, exams.
- Especially in first years, students may be **unaware of what is expected of them** and how they are supposed to study.
- Students **may easily become anxious or concerned** at different stages in their studies (e.g. by exams, gaining qualifications for jobs, money matters, etc.), **and/or have social group problems** and tutors and demonstrators may feel more approachable (closer in age, enthusiastic, there to help).
Are we (tutors/demonstrators/markers/TAs) well placed for providing guidance?

• Yes, much more than we sometimes appreciate because:
  • We have the knowledge but also basic skills required for the course
  • It is our responsibility to know of its requirements and what is expected of students!
  • We may have taken the course ourselves, and thus be able to advise on studying for it
  • We have surely accumulated experience about studying in university in general
  • We know more about where to find help in case of difficulties

• Difficulties: our enthusiasm and good results in the course may differentiate us to students, not prescribing ‘recipes for success’, level of support vs. time
Support boundaries

- It is not our responsibility or appropriate to provide support on matters not directly related to the course work.
- For personal matters, you should not try to advise or ask for many details; Instead, it is best to direct the student to a university service which is specialised in the kind of support that they need; If not sure about the right service, direct student to the student support officers or personal tutor.
- It is not in your interest or the student’s to agree to meet on a regular basis; this is the role of the counselling or medical services.
Academic support
Academic support

• In small groups, write ideas on poster paper for helping students develop:
  • Problem solving skills (essential in Informatics courses)
  • Academic writing skills (for writing essays, articles, etc.) including referencing skills (and avoiding plagiarism)
  • Presentation skills
  • Skills for tackling coursework/exams (thus improving self-confidence)
1. Some ideas for helping students develop problem solving skills

- If you see students in class (tutors/demonstrators/some TAs):
  - Encourage reading the problem carefully to uncover keywords, unnecessary or unclear information
  - Encourage working backwards from the goal
  - Give students time to come up with ideas for tackling the problem
  - Break difficult tasks into subtasks to tackle in turn, using step-by-step approach
  - Ask students for ideas on how to proceed rather than solutions
  - Ask students to articulate assumptions
1. Some ideas for helping students develop problem solving skills

- Prompt students to explain their thought process and evaluate progress
- Develop analytical thinking by encouraging students to ask questions and redirect them to the class
- Discuss different ways of solving a problem
- Ask specific questions to test for learning
1. Some ideas for helping students develop problem solving skills

- **If marking:**
  - Put value on steps and argumentation (consult with CO/TA!)
  - Break your feedback into the different steps
  - Use questions to get students thinking about cases not considered
  - Comment on the clarity of the student’s thought process

- **If you design course material as a TA**, you could explicitly break tasks and request certain contents, especially for first year students and first tasks
  - Encourage students to attend IAD courses on problem solving
2. Some ideas for helping students develop academic writing skills

- If you see students in class:
  - Bring examples of academic writing and discuss structure, contents, layout, presentation
  - Advise students on standard structure (Introduction, Related Work, main body, Conclusion, Acknowledgements, References), its purpose and importance
  - Help students prepare a plan for sections and paragraphs
  - Emphasise the importance of summaries, linking and signposting words
  - Ask students to practice writing abstracts (being convincing while brief)
2. Some ideas for helping students develop academic writing skills

• Remind students about plagiarism and its consequences
• Advise them to make a note of all sources used (ideally, in a database) and cite them in the text, using quotes for the author’s direct words
• Provide examples of referencing styles
• Explain to students that they should write in their own words for their own purposes, and not just report what others have said

• **If you mark academic writing:**
  • Touch on all of the issues from above and point the student to useful online resources
  • We are required to report plagiarism
2. Some ideas for helping students develop academic writing skills

- **If you design course material as a TA:**
  - Include clear requirements for the structure, content, layout and presentation of coursework including academic writing, especially for students who are new to it
  - Provide links to useful online resources
  - Point the students to IAD LearnBetter and “Good Academic Practice” resources, and encourage them to attend IAD courses on academic writing
3. Some ideas for helping students develop presentation skills

- Remind or help students work out a plan for the presentation (purpose, structure, audience, duration), discuss how it will be assessed
- Discuss with them what makes for a good presentation (e.g. designing slides, keeping track of time, intonation, tone, facial expression, movement, eye contact, posture, etc.) maybe by watching online presentations (e.g. on TED)
- Point the students to online examples of very successful presentations
- Encourage them to rehearse (with colleagues/in the mirror), give feedback
3. Some ideas for helping students develop presentation skills

• When you give feedback, offer suggestions for improving presentation

• If the quality of the presentation is not assessed, discuss with the CO offering bonus marks for good presentations as extra motivation

• If you design the requirements for the presentation as a TA:
  • Make the criteria for a good presentation (even by including the marking scheme) clear
  • Provide links to useful examples and online resources
4. Some ideas for helping students develop skills for tackling coursework

• **If you see students in class**, provide them with all the necessary information:
  • What is expected, assessment criteria, format, deadlines (essential for you to know!)
  
  **BUT ALSO**
  • Solve tasks in a similar way, using the same format in class
  • If sample solutions are provided, advocate for them to be in line with assessment
  • If possible, make reference to and discuss past exam papers
4. Some ideas for helping students develop skills for tackling coursework

- **If you are a marker:**
  - Praise good parts and offer suggestions for better meeting expectations in feedback
  - When discussing feedback, prompt the student to help him/her develop ideas while being strict about requirements
  - If marking follow up assignment, comment on the progress made by the student and praise good progress
4. Some ideas for helping students develop skills for tackling coursework

• **If you design the coursework as a TA:**
  - Do your best to write clear instructions and be open to update them if necessary
  - Consider including frequently asked questions
  - Develop a detailed marking scheme first and structure it according to it
  - Keep clear links and be consistent with lectures/labs/tutorials
• Point the students to IAD LearnBetter Essentials on revision and exams
The Personal Tutor System

• In small groups, browse through the personal tutoring statement and links and look for answers to the following questions:
  1. What is the role of the personal tutor?
  2. What does he/she help students with? How can he/she be contacted?
  3. How frequently do personal tutors meet with their students?
  4. Who is responsible for administration/teaching matters/academic advice/personal advice?
  5. How quickly should the personal tutor respond? What if he/she is unavailable?
  6. Is information discussed during personal tutor meetings kept confidential?
Other sources of academic support in Informatics

- **InfPALS** (for 1st year students and 2nd year 2nd semester):
  - Weekly sessions led by later-year students (PALS leaders/facilitators), who facilitate (not teach) sessions on some of their more complicated core courses
  - Practice for exams, developing learning skills, getting used to university life, making friends

- **InfBASE** (for 1st and 2nd year students)
  - Student helpdesk led by experienced tutors on core pre-honours courses; can also be used as study group

- **Programming Club** (for 1st and 2nd year students)
  - Voluntary course aimed to develop students’ programming skills
Study Skills Support by the IAD

• Individually, spend a few minutes browsing through the IAD website ([http://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development](http://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development)) for information on their services for study skills support for different students
Personal support
Sources of personal support

- Student Support Officers; Less now, the Personal Tutor System
- Student Disability Service
- Student Counselling Service
- The Advice Place EUSA
- Accommodation Services
- Chaplain
- Careers Service
- Edinburgh Global (former International Office)
Sources of personal support

- Individually, think about a scenario in which you are asked for help on a personal matter by a student. Use the diagrams in the “Helping distressed students” guide to find a university service which could help the student.
Sources of personal support

• As split into 2 groups, spend a few minutes browsing through the services offered by:
  • The Informatics Student Support Team: http://web.inf.ed.ac.uk/infweb/student-services/ito/admin/student-support
  • The Advice Place EUSA: https://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/support_and_advice/the_advice_place/
  • The Careers Service: https://www.ed.ac.uk/careers
• Share your findings with your colleagues
Tips and tricks for responding to student support requests

• Listen to the student to encourage him/her to explain and not make a wrong impression!
• Avoid taking notes (distracting!) unless absolutely necessary (ask for agreement if so)
• Whether you like the student and the issue raised is irrelevant
• Avoid trying to comfort the student by making the issue seem nonsignificant (e.g. “You will manage, don’t worry!”); you should keep opinions to yourself and not act as a counsellor.
Tips and tricks for responding to student support requests

• Classify the problem to decide whether:
  • you can solve it (e.g. provide resources)
  • you need to direct the student to a university service
  • the student can cope
• Be discrete, but do not promise complete confidentiality and advise about the need to contact the PT/CO; encourage the student to contact them if his/her performance may be affected.
Resources

• Informatics Teaching Support training webpage
• “Tutoring and Demonstrating: a Handbook” chapter 7 (“Supporting and Advising Students”)
• “Advising students on personal and academic matters” material on the “IAD Resources on Tutoring and Demonstrating” channel in Learn
• IAD course “Advising on personal and academic matters”, Wed 3 Apr 2019
Resources

- University of Edinburgh Support Services
- The “Helping distressed students” guide for staff of the Student Disability Service