

# Counselling Distance Learners:

## An Experiment at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand.

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In August 1993, The Open Polytechnic decided to establish a counselling service for its 30,000 enrolled students. Historically, The Open Polytechnic (previously the Technical Correspondence Institute) had specialised in trades and vocationally based courses, having been developed after the Second World War by the Government of the day to rehabilitate returned servicemen. As students studied by correspondence, it was possible for ex-serviceman to complete vocational qualifications without the disruption of leaving home and work to study.

Whilst previously the population of both staff and students had been predominantly male, the 1993 research on student population characteristics, reveals a more equal gender balance, with students predominantly enrolled in a variety of commerce based courses (Clift *et al.*, 1993). Restructuring away from the manual trades and specialisation in commerce based courses, had also significantly changed the gender balance of the teaching staff, leading to claims in the media that the institution was experiencing a 'gender cleansing' (Holmes Show, 1 June 1994).

Decreasing Government subsidising over the past few years, coupled with increasing competition for the education dollar, meant that some courses that had smaller enrolments were discontinued or delegated to the Industry Training Organisations. The tendency for increasing numbers of staff to be employed on a casual basis or on time limited contracts, together with the implementation of proactive EEO practices, were two further influences accounting for this trend.

It was in this climate that the establishment of the student counselling service took place.

### Do Distance Learners Need Counselling?

This was the question originally asked by staff and answered for The Open Polytechnic by visiting experts in distance education, from Athabasca University, Canada. Athabasca University, established with the assistance of The Open University of Britain, is considered internationally to be at the forefront in distance education theory and practice, particularly in the area of student support services.

Given the current economic climate, it was considered crucial that The Open Polytechnic developed services based on proven models and systems rather than attempting to 'reinvent the wheel', or to risk duplicating the mistakes made by other distance learning institutions.

University of Athabasca's Vice-Chancellor and Senior Counsellor's visit to the Open Polytechnic in 1992 suggested to management, the virtue of establishing comprehensive support systems for students, which included the development of a student counselling service. From the Athabasca University experience, students needed information and direction with respect to their level of academic skill when beginning or returning to study (Brindley, 1992).

The factors that turned out to be the crucial ones in student retention from the Athabasca experience were, good information, personal support/social networks, and academic preparedness (*Ibid.*). The 'Surprise Factor', was identified as a common response of students new to distance learning-i.e. the expectations of the student differ considerably from the actual experience after the first course materials arrive (*Ibid.*).

The expectation that study at home

would be easier in some respects did not often prove to be the case, evoking, for some students, a sense of panic and early drop out or failure to begin studies (*Ibid.*).

Secondly, conflicting time demands and difficulty combining study with family, social and community obligations, was highlighted by the visitors from Canada (*Ibid.*). As the majority of TOPNZ students in 1993 were found to be in paid employment and in the 24+ age group, learning was, similarly for TOPNZ students, likely to be but one of life's roles, balanced alongside career family and other commitments (Clift *et al.*, 1993).

How these concerns would be translated into practice, in terms of the provision of appropriate services, was delegated to the Manager, Student Services. The appointment of a student support officer, learning assistance co-ordinator, and student counsellor, was the chosen strategy.

### The Aims and Objectives of the Student Counselling Service

The philosophy of the service, once established, was 'to provide a free, confidential, professional counselling service to enrolled students on any personal issue affecting study' (Promotional Material, 1993).

Secondly, 'to offer vocational guidance to intending students who have general queries about careers' (*Ibid.*).

A consultancy service for staff dealing with student concerns, and facilitating referral to local helping and counselling resources, where appropriate, were further services offered. As increasing numbers of staff were employed on a casual basis, off campus, there was an increasing demand for advice about dealing with students in distress and about avenues of assistance for students in their local communities. Staff were informed of the services provided by personal presentation, personalised letter, and pamphlet.

Information was sent with course materials to every newly enrolled student, advertised to existing students via advertisements in the Student Handbook, and student magazine.

A number of publications were produced for staff on identifying a student in distress, how to refer to the service and use consultancy services; and how to advise students on pre-enrolment matters. Publications were also produced for students on the counselling service, resources for decision making on careers, and stress management guide. A regular column for student letters and a 'problem' page or 'Letter to Student Counsellor', were publicised.

## The Response After the First Year

A total of 368 students and 94 staff were assisted over 656 consultations. Every staff member and student using the service was sent a brief questionnaire to complete and forward back to the Manager, Student Services. Of the 115 students who returned completed questionnaires, 72% stated that they 'felt better', after having contact with the counsellor; 98% said that they felt the counsellor had clearly understood their problem, and 99% said they would recommend contact with the service to friends or colleagues. The average age of respondents was in the 31-40 age range, reflecting the age profile of TOPNZ students. Most students found out about the service by student publications (student handbook or student magazine) or via tutors. Reasons for referral ranged from requests for career's or pre-enrolment advising (35%), personal counselling (30%), issues relating to administrative concerns, (13%) and dilemmas faced by students with disabilities whose particular needs were not adequately catered for by the current system and services (22%). As an upshot of the relatively high proportion of students specifying special needs, a follow up study of 557 students disclosing disability at the point of enrolment, was undertaken and policy advice, in consultation with a disability consultant, provided to senior management. A further follow up study of 331 students studying from prisons and other total institutions, was undertaken. Staff training sessions were facilitated for 62 staff on basic telephone counselling skills and pre-enrolment advising.

## Liaison with Community and Statutory Agencies

Meetings on campus were arranged with the following welfare organisations/

Government Departments to facilitate links between TOPNZ and these organisations.

- Royal Foundation for the Blind
- Workbridge
- Schizophrenia Fellowship
- Prisoner's Aid and Rehabilitation Society
- Department of Social Welfare
- The Careers Service
- Barnardoes

Groups of tutors and staff attended the meetings with representatives of these organisations, to network and explore how the organisations' services could be used by TOPNZ students.

## Mode of Contact and Ethnicity

Contact with students was largely over the free phone (85%) with (9%) initiated by letter and the remainder by personal interview (6%) 75% of respondents self identified as pakeha, 15% Maori and 6% Pacific Island. As there are both Pacific Island and Maori Development Officers, students had and continue to have the choice of contact with a culturally appropriate worker.

## Evaluating the Results

The inherent danger in deriving performance indicators in counselling services has been well documented (*cf.*: Burke, 1990). The services must be evaluated against criteria that are consistent with the service's main objectives, not what is outside the service's control (*Op. Cit.*, p.4). Thus, the aims and objectives of the service need to be an integral component of the overall institution's philosophy and mission statement.

Furthermore, it is noted that the aims and objectives of the service should be congruent with - and an important means of delivering - the aims of the institution as a whole (*Ibid.*). From the writer's experience, it is also vital that the strategic planning and implementation of counselling services be seen as a most important process, taking into account the institution's missions, and goals and strategies.

The change of vision for The Open Polytechnic with an emphasis on being commercially self supporting, and a change in management personnel, over the course of the fifteen months in which the counselling service was operating, had meant that the counselling service could no longer be seen in the context of the

overall vision of the Department it was moved to (Marketing and Customer Relations), nor to some extent, in terms of the institution as a whole. However, in terms of the performance indicators established for the service and those considered crucial in counselling services (quality of service, operational characteristics of the service), there was a high degree of satisfaction expressed by staff and student users.

In 1995, with the movement to regional centres way from a freephone as the main point of access for students, and the public, it has been decided that client liaison managers and support officers will take up the task of developing referral systems to counselling and other local support services.

The counselling service was seen, in retrospect, by the new management structure as having a "trouble shooting" function in assisting staff and students to adjust and obtain services, until the new structure was in place. Thus, it had provided a safety net for both staff and students who fell between the fabric of support as the institution restructured.

## The Implications for Distance Education in Social Work

Previous research in this country has highlighted the need for social service students completing studies extramurally, to have access to appropriate support services (Nash, 1991). Isolation (being the only student studying in the area) and difficulty fitting study into work and other commitments was found to cause stress and anxiety for many distance learners (*Ibid.* p.19). Mature students returning to study or those students who have not studied at tertiary level, have special requirements (Selby, 1995). The need for culturally appropriate support to be available to Maori and Pacific Island students who study social work by distance has also been highlighted (*Ibid.*).

## What sort of "contact" is required?

A range of support options is called for, the following topics having been recommended, in discussions with distance educators in social work.

### 1. Time Management

For those who have not studied at tertiary level before, assistance with identifying all existing commitments and realistically organising and planning the

year, should be given priority. Being realistic about what is possible and what is not and setting appropriate limits, is necessary.

**2. Enlisting the Support of Whanau, Family and Friends**

In addition to developing support networks and communicating needs well before the start of the academic year, study groups, study buddies and work place supporters can be fostered through academic course contact. Mentoring of younger students by students more advanced in their studies, and encouragement for groups of students working at the same placement agency to form a support network, are some options that distance learners in social work find helpful.

**3. Pre-enrolment and Vocational Counselling**

Prior to enrolling in a social work course, intending students often require assistance in assessing which is the appropriate course of study given their career aspirations. Information on alternative courses and training providers needs to be available so that personal goals and motivation to study can be identified and alternative career/study pathways can be charted in advance of enrolment.

**4. Personal Counselling and Support**  
Problems can arise for students study-

ing at distance when the usual ups and downs of everyday life occur in the context of the pressures of study. When commitment to study is high, encouragement to reorder priorities to enable students to resolve personal issues, is important.

**5. Academic or Course Related Guidance**

Often there are questions related to course content or particular academic difficulties that arise as the course continues. Particular Study/learning difficulties may require assessment and referral to appropriate assistance, when broader than the context of the course e.g. essay writing, examination preparation.

**Summary and Recommendations**

Distance learners in social work, as in other disciplines, require different kinds of contact at different times in their academic career. How this contact should be best provided is an theme for further research. The medium of contact (telephone, personal interview, e mail, letter) is likely to affect the kinds of assistance can be provided; as well as the person available to assist. It would seem appropriate for example, that academic guidance be provided by tutors and those who have course related knowledge, however, non-departmential employees may be best

equipped to provide pre-enrolment, careers and personal counselling, given the need to look broadly at options that may include liaison with other helping/training providers to give unbiased help.

The experience at Open Polytechnic and Massey University to date suggests the benefits of providing a range of support mechanisms for students studying at distance. How this could be most effectively implemented in social work programmes in other learning institutions is a question for further consideration and discussion.

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