

# Students' views of support in higher education: a study of current practice and future directions

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*This article reports findings from an empirical study of students' views of support in higher education. Findings from questionnaires and telephone interviews suggest that the characteristics and sources of support can be understood in relation to university and non-university led systems. Students identified non-university led support, for example, friends on the course and in the university, and family and friends outside the university, as the most significant sources of support. The article concludes that university led systems, such as induction and timetabling, should recognise the significance of non-university support. Both forms of support should combine to provide effective structures which support student learning.*

Keywords: student support, student views, higher education

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This article builds on ideas developed in an earlier paper by two of the current authors which discussed students' experiences and perceptions of support within higher education (Jacklin and Robinson, 2007). That paper focused on generic support structures and the nature and sources of support identified as important by students. The paper presented a model of support which explored academic and non-academic support (see Appendix) and discussed dimensions of support in relation to availability and accessibility. It also suggested that students appeared to understand 'support' in terms of a number of categories which included material resources, information and guidance, and encouragement/support from colleagues and friends. It concluded that support should be understood in terms of its interactional and relational characteristics. It also argued that the way in which support was organised was important in order to ensure its accessibility.

This article draws on data from the same research project but focuses on findings about support from family and friendship networks based in the university and outside. Our discussion is based on an analysis of empirical data generated by 144 completed questionnaires and 27 telephone interviews with students from one school in a higher education institution (HEI) in the UK between 2004 and 2006. The data were derived from the students' views of support as they experienced it. We take 'support' to mean 'help appropriate to the needs of learners', and include in this both structures and systems, as well as interpersonal relationships. 'Academic' support is the support which relates directly to learning in relation to the content of instruction/interaction. 'Non-academic' support is taken to mean any support that helps learning but is not directly related to the content of learning, for example pastoral/welfare support. This approach draws on Tait's conceptualisation of the rationale for student support as cognitive, affective and systemic. Tait (2000) argues that students need resources which support learning, provide a sympathetic environment and provide information about the organisation. The emphasis in this article is on the cognitive and affective categories identified by Tait.

We also characterise support as university led and non-university led. University led support consists of resources such as student advisors and mentors, student support services and personal tutors, who are paid for and supplied by the university. Non-university led support, on the other hand, is any support led by students, even when it derives from attendance at university. This includes support from friends on the course and within the broader university, friends outside the university, partners and other family members. We argue later that effective university led support needs to recognise, encourage and resource non-university led systems of support.

## **Background**

The stated aim of the government to increase the proportion of the population involved in HE has led to greater attention being paid to student recruitment and retention. Research on the impact of widening participation and retaining a larger and more diverse student population has identified the significance of a number of interacting factors. These include: a lack of 'fit' between individual student, HEI and chosen course (Christie *et al*, 2004; Thomas, 2002; Bolam and Dodgson, 2003), student perceptions of poor social and academic support (Wilcox *et al*, 2005; Mackie, 1998), and financial pressures (Thanki, 2000; Rhodes and Nevill, 2004; Bennett, 2003). Various approaches to understanding these stressors suggest that it is their timing and interaction which are

more significant rather than the personality of individual students or the impact of a specific issue which makes for a positive or negative outcome (Mackie, 1998; Christie *et al*, 2004). The literature also identifies a range of initiatives designed to reduce the impact of some of these stresses, including projects designed to improve relationships between students and tutors (Ridley, 2004; Malik, 2000). A range of papers discuss the significance of HEIs encouraging the development of peer support or mentoring (Mullen *et al*, 2000; Castley and Dolan, 1998; Nelson and Furber, 1996). Student support is most frequently explored as an important response to financial pressure. Mackie highlights the impact of financial issues on student expectations:

‘Financial issues do not simply act as a constraint in the sense of not having sufficient funds to continue. Students increasingly spend their own money to pay for university. They do not want to continue with an experience which is not fulfilling their needs and which might result in failure and which therefore “wastes” their own money.’ (1998: 4)

Thus, the relationship between higher fees and the increasing number of students spending time in paid work has led to higher expectations of overall quality of experience in HE. In turn these factors have led to increased expectations of support and more students requiring higher levels of support.

In this context, research on student support has mainly explored initiatives developed by the HEI. Less attention has been paid to the levels of support which students give to each other or the support provided by family and friends who are outside the university. One exception to this is the work of Absee and Simpson (1998) who discuss views of students studying on distance learning programmes and emphasise the significance of support from friends and family.

### **Research context**

Our research focused on students mainly following professional programmes of study in three departments – Education, Law, and Social Work – within one school of an HEI situated in the south of the UK. The HEI is a small campus-based university, with approximately 11,000 students. At the time of the research within the School there were approximately 2,000 students. These students were diverse in terms of age, mode of study, culture and specific learning needs: 83 per cent of students within the School were ‘mature’. The cultural diversity of the School was evident in both the national and international student groups. Nearly half of

the students followed full-time programmes of study which were more 'traditional' in terms of the learning context in higher education. Some students also spent part of their time in professional placements, engaged in workplace learning. However, part-time and distant learners accounted for just over half of the students within the School. Some students, although full-time, were mainly based within work placements and came onto campus for short periods on a regular basis.

The sample included those who were young and straight from school; mature students with established external networks of support (for example, home or work based); students who came onto campus for only short periods of time; students required to spend large amounts of time on campus; and those required to take part in work-based placements. There were a number of students with specific learning needs; however, the research did not focus on this group in particular, we looked broadly at the needs of all students.

### **Student groups central to the research**

In total, data were collected from 144 students over two academic years. Each of the student groups involved in the study were full-time students; however, the amount of time they were required to come onto campus varied depending on the programme of study. This group comprised:

Two cohorts of undergraduate students on the second year of the newly developed BA Social Work programme run in collaboration with another local HEI. Students work across both HEIs and the programme involves work-based placements.

One cohort of undergraduate students on the second year of the Law LLB programme.

One cohort of postgraduate students on the Law CPE programme following a one-year intensive undergraduate-level programme.

One cohort of undergraduate students on the second year Maths or English BA in Education Studies. These students are in the university for one day a week and spend a large amount of time in school placements.

### **Research strategy**

We placed great emphasis on consulting students in order to learn, first hand, which sources of support were most important to them, and to help determine to what extent support was a significant element of the learning process. In the school context, the value of listening to the views of children and young people on learning-related issues is

becoming increasingly recognised and there is a range of literature to support this (eg Arnot *et al*, 2004; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Stoll, 2004). Lodge (2005: 129) acknowledges the move towards listening to pupils and states:

‘In this view, the young people are the “expert witness” with something to tell us about their experiencing of schooling.’

It is this notion of ‘expert witness’ which has impacted on our research and our belief that consulting with students was the best way for us to learn about their experiences.

The research was divided into three phases. In the first, questionnaires were the main source of data. The initial questionnaires were given to, and completed by, 26 second-year students following the Social Work programme. We asked students to state which forms of support were important and who provided particular forms of support. At this stage the questionnaire was designed to explore issues of support identified as important by students.

The responses indicated that, from the student perspective, the most valuable forms of support were as follows:

- A listening ear when feeling stressed about workload.
- A listening ear when feeling stressed about personal matters.
- Reassurance that you are capable of doing the work.
- Someone to motivate you to do the work.
- Help with essay writing.
- Financial advice.
- Advice about university procedures, eg if work is going to be late.
- Practical support, eg with everyday jobs.
- Help to provide equipment needed to support specific learning needs.
- Other help with specific learning needs.

The initial analysis of the data from this first phase underpinned the design of subsequent in-depth telephone interviews with eight of the 26 students. In the second phase of the research, using the forms of support identified in the first questionnaire, students were asked to identify on a grid which of these were important to them and who provided that support. This questionnaire was completed by 82 law students (24 CPE, 58 LLB) and nine undergraduate education students. The questionnaires were followed by 19 telephone interviews with both law and education students.

In the third phase of the research, the questionnaire was further refined to focus on the key questions identified by analysing data from

the earlier questionnaires and interviews. Students were asked whether the identified forms of support were important/not important to them, and who/what provided the particular form of support.

### Findings

When discussing findings we refer to the questionnaire data from stages two and three of the research, relating to the 118 students who were specifically asked to indicate the importance of the various support categories. The interview data, derived from 27 of the students in phases one and two of the research (due to time constraints, interviews were not conducted with students in phase three of the research). The interview questions were largely the same regardless of the research phase.

Figure 1 represents questionnaire responses by students when asked about the sources of the support they have received. It clearly illustrates differences in students' perspectives of the support they receive. It shows that 'friends on the course' were most frequently rated as an important source of support, mentioned 321 times by the 118 students who completed questionnaires. 'Family/parents/partners' was seen as the next most important category of support, mentioned 267 times by students as important. 'Other friends' were mentioned 231 times, making the overall 'friends' category a hugely important source of perceived support. 'Student support staff' and 'tutors/lecturers/tutorials'

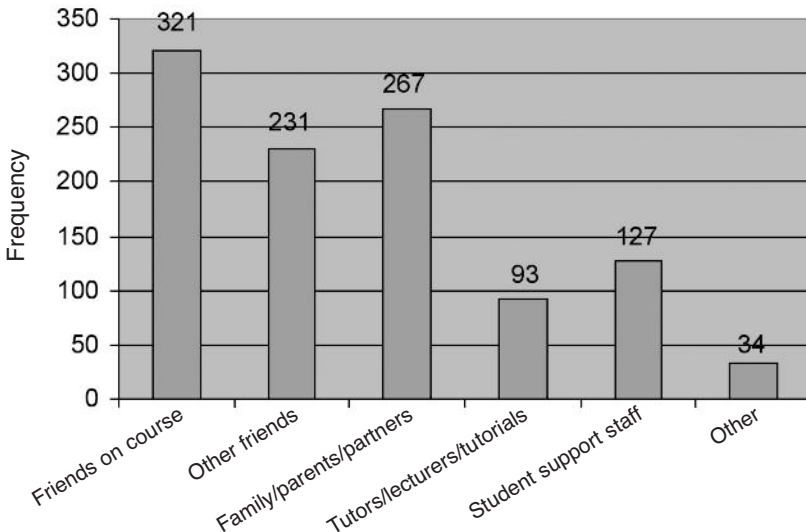


Figure 1: Differences in the sources of support received by students

were perceived as less important, being mentioned by students 127 and 93 times respectively. Within the 'Other' category, the sources of support mentioned by students as important included the student handbook, website, intranet, student union, and the students themselves.

### **Support experienced by students**

We were interested to determine whether students' perceptions of the nature of support received from friends and family differed from that received from university staff. Table 1 illustrates the nature of support categories which students in phases two and three of the research indicated as important to them, and who they considered provided such support. Although the focus of this discussion is on the first four sources of support identified on the table ('Friends on the course'; 'Friends not on the course'; 'Friends generally'; and 'Family/parents/partners'), we have included all the sources of support which were identified by students who responded to the questionnaire in order to allow comparisons to be made.

From Table 1 it can be seen that friends (either 'on the course', 'not on the course' or 'generally') were most frequently mentioned as the most important source of support for all of the different kinds of support received, except for one, that relating to advice about university procedures. The table illustrates that 'friends on the course' were rated as very important, since the frequency of responses is relatively high for most 'nature of support' categories. Friends on the course were particularly important for 'someone to listen to when feeling stressed about workload', 'someone to talk to about the course programme', 'someone to listen when feeling stressed about personal matters', 'someone to motivate them to do the work' and 'reassurance about being able to do the work'.

The support given by friends on the course in terms of help with essay writing and advice about university procedures was found to be less important, and the least important support from friends on the course was financial advice and practical support.

The next most important source of support was 'family/parents/partners'. In order of importance, this source of support was particularly important for 'someone to listen to when stressed about personal matters', 'someone to listen when feeling stressed about workload', for 'reassurance about being able to do the work' and for 'someone to motivate them to do the work'. Support from family/parents/partners was moderately important for 'help with essay writing' and 'someone to talk to about the programme', and less important for 'advice about university procedures' and 'practical support and financial advice'.

TABLE 1  
*The importance of the 'nature of support' categories in phases two and three of the research*

Source of support	Someone to talk to, generally, about programme expectations/workload	A listening ear when feeling stressed about workload	A listening ear when feeling stressed about personal matters	Reassurance that you are capable of doing the work	Someone to motivate you to do the work	Help with essay writing	Financial advice	Advice about unit procedures, eg if work going to be late	Practical support, eg with everyday jobs	Total
Friends on the course	56	72	49	43	43	32	7	19	0	321
Friends not on the course	8	47	54	26	19	5	14	0	0	173
Friends (generally)	9	15	15	9	6	1	1	0	2	58
Family/parents/partner	21	59	64	54	45	13	5	2	4	267
Personal tutor	5	5	2	2	1	2	0	0	0	17
Seminar tutors/subject tutors/course tutors/topic tutors	6	1	0	2	2	5	0	0	0	16
Tutorials/tutors	12	3	1	9	3	8	2	4	0	42
Lecturer/lectures	3	3	0	4	2	2	0	4	0	18
University staff (generally)	12	8	2	15	14	19	5	24	0	99
Student support unit	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Personal advisor/advice service/student advisor	2	1	4	0	0	1	4	4	0	16
Mentor (either student-mentors or work-placement mentors)	0	2	1	2	2	4	0	0	0	11
Handbook/website/intranet	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	8
Other (eg student rep/student union)	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	6
Self	1	1	1	4	9	1	1	0	2	20
<b>Total</b>	136	218	193	170	147	93	43	65	8	1073

The category ‘friends not on the course’ was relatively mixed in terms of importance; this was rated highly for ‘someone to listen when stressed about workload’, ‘someone to talk to when stressed about personal matters’, but only moderately important for ‘reassurance about being able to do the work’, ‘motivating them to do the work’ and ‘financial advice’. Support from friends not on the course was less important for ‘someone to talk to about the programme’, ‘financial advice’, ‘practical help’ and ‘advice about university procedures’.

### Sources of support

Taking the total responses given by students when indicating the sources of support they considered to be important, the non-university led sources of support accounted for 78 per cent of the students’ responses, while the university led sources of support accounted for only 22 per cent of responses. The non-university led sources included the three ‘friends’ categories as well as the ‘family/parents/partners’ category and the students themselves.

We were interested to see if there were differences in the importance placed on the various ‘nature of support’ categories by students from each of the three student groups – Social Work, Law, and Education. Figure 2 illustrates the percentages of students from each of the three

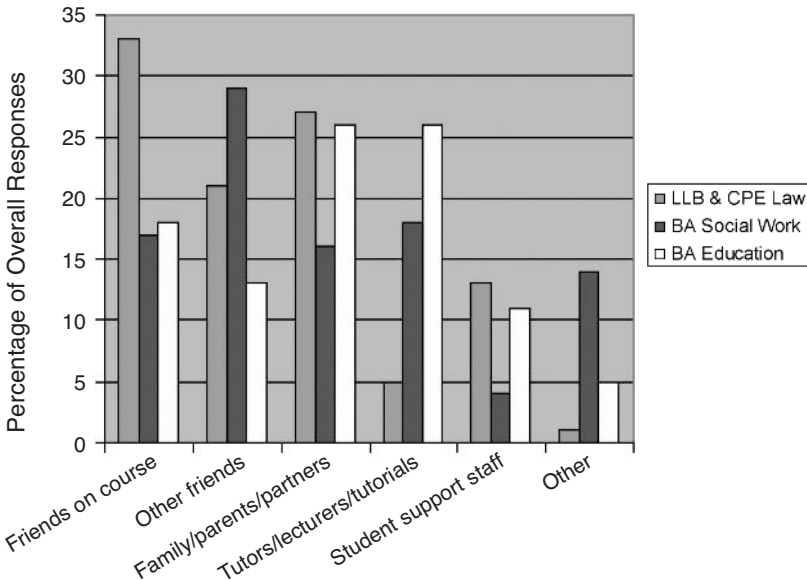


Figure 2: Sources of support by department

programmes who rated the different sources of support as important. Percentages have been used due to the differences in sample size from each of the student groups.

The group of students following the Law programme rated 'friends on the course' as the most important source of support, with this category receiving 33 per cent of all responses by the Law group. For students following the Social Work programme, 'other' friends (which includes friends not on the course and friends generally) were seen as the most important source of support, receiving 29 per cent of all responses from this group. For those following the Education programme, family/parents/partners were the most important sources of support, receiving 26 per cent of all responses.

The questionnaire responses show that the three groups of students all identified non-university led support as being the most significant. However, the education group also perceived 'tutors, lecturers and tutorials' as significant forms of support. These findings were consistent for both academic and non-academic forms of support and were reflected in the student interviews.

### **Student interviews**

During interviews, students talked at length about the significance of the non-university led support. The non-university led academic support was seen to be largely in the form of discussions on, and giving advice about, work, and students sharing workbooks and notes. This support was largely provided by peers on the course. In terms of non-academic support, the interviews highlighted that students found support in the form of 'someone to talk to about stress caused by workload' to be particularly important. Students seemed to believe that because they have a shared understanding of what each is experiencing in terms of workload and course expectations, they can give each other reassurance that they are not the only one experiencing problems, reassurance that they are capable of actually doing the work, and motivating each other to continue and do the work.

The following comments reflect the opinions of many of the students we spoke to; they refer to both academic and non-academic support provided by friends.

'There are five of us and we all get on well, it's the ringing up, and like everything, if you're stuck the chances are they're stuck too and we just ring each other up and talk about it. There can't have been a week that's gone by when I haven't spoken to them, they know what you're going through and we all have the same sort of problems with the workload and things.'

‘We help each other (people on the course), we will tell each other references from books and that sort of thing, we text and email each other quite a lot, we’ve got a fabulous group, we’re all very supportive of each other and will help if someone is feeling down.’

‘I’ve got a particular friend on the course, she’s a single parent and we’ve both got 15-year-old daughters and think alike. We go to each other’s houses to study or we are on the phone to talk things through, my husband thinks I’m married to her. We’ve given each other the confidence to get on with it, given each other encouragement.’

The interviews also reflected the questionnaire responses in terms of the importance students placed on the support they received from family/parents/partners. During the interviews, the students acknowledged that this group mostly provided non-academic support in the form of emotional support, including motivating students to work and giving them confidence that they are able to do the work.

‘It’s just having them [family] there and helping me through stuff, having them on the end of a phone, it’s just good to have them there to say “Of course you can do it you silly girl!”’

‘He [her husband] gives a lot of emotional support; you know, telling me I can do it and that sort of thing, and also domestic support, he works a lot himself but he still helps a lot with things that need doing at home.’

## **Discussion**

Our findings led us to expand the original model of support (see Appendix) beyond university led support. This was a result of the significance students placed on non-university led support, both academic and non-academic. We now understand more about the nature of non-university led support, what this consists of, who provides it and what characteristics of support are important to students. The research identified friends on the course as the most significant providers of general support about programme expectations, help with essay writing and a ‘listening ear’ when stressed about workload. Peers on the course were, therefore, the most important source of academic support but it is clear they also provided significant emotional support in the form of reassurance, motivation, and support with personal matters. It is also clear that there are advantages to having a wider support network of university friends since they provide both academic and emotional support, particularly managing stress in relation to workload and

personal issues. Although non-university friends remained important, particularly in relation to managing stress, it was family, partners and parents who made the most significant contribution to emotional support during the course. This is most evident in relation to personal stress but friends and family also provided support with workload stress, reassurance and motivation.

The research supports Tait's (2000) categorisation of support as cognitive, affective or systemic; suggesting that these dimensions of support are as relevant to campus-based students as to those studying on distance learning programmes. Evidence from our students emphasises academic and emotional support (Tait's cognitive and affective categories) rather than systems and structures. However, the data provide some evidence that while students rely on peers to provide information about course organisation, university led systems are the source of more general guidance about university structures and processes.

By seeking information from all students rather than only those who had accessed support from university led systems, we obtained a broad picture of the students' view of support. This is not to suggest that university led support is unimportant, but that it is not the first choice for students in most situations. In our sample, students said that university led support is their first choice only when they want financial advice or information about university procedures. However, other examples in the interviews demonstrate how significant timely advice and support from university staff is in retaining students in the university, accessing resources and developing students' learning strategies (Jacklin and Robinson, 2007).

One of the key implications of the research is that university-led systems need to recognise the significance of non-university led support, and find ways of encouraging informal processes to develop. The interviews identified two examples of this process: the delivery of effective induction programmes and the management of the timetable. One of the students in the interviews described induction as a 'good opportunity to get to know people in the university and on the course'. This suggests that induction should not only be about giving information and managing the practicalities of change but should also provide flexible social time. This early stage in the student experience is an opportunity for university staff to encourage group formation and support the development of a collaborative course culture. In a survey of mature part-time students, one of the main findings was the importance of the role of academic staff in enabling students to get to know one another informally (Nelson and Furber, 1996). Other work highlights the significance of social integration as an important aspect of decisions

about staying or leaving (Wilcox *et al*, 2005). The early weeks at university are a time when patterns of relationships are formed which influence students' experience of the university in the longer term.

The interviews also suggested that the structure of the timetable provides opportunities for supportive relationships to develop. The small group of Education students in the sample follow a timetable which has a workshop format. This enables students to have built-in coffee and lunch breaks, providing time for staff and student contact. The small number of students on the programme and the organisation of the teaching were the main reasons students gave for finding course tutors equally important sources of support as their family. With larger student numbers and increasing demands on staff time, it is not possible for most programmes to adopt this approach to timetabling. However, it is possible to build in opportunities for peer learning activities, discussion and informal contact into course management structures.

From a student perspective, one of the most important contributions university led support can make is to recognise, facilitate and value the development of friendship networks. The research took place in a campus university with well resourced and effectively delivered systems of university led support. In some HEIs, support systems may not be so well developed, and in those circumstances students have to rely on non-university support because of a lack of alternative resources.

Most of the students in the sample were full-time and may, therefore, have found it easier to develop course and university wide support networks than those studying part-time. Wilcox *et al* (2005) argue that students who live some distance from the university may find it more difficult to establish support. These structural factors interact with issues such as expectations and personal preferences to influence the development of supportive environments both individually and collectively. For those students whose support is limited or inaccessible, the lack of non-university led support will have a significant impact on their learning experience.

This article has argued that non-university led support is a key component of a successful learning experience for all students. An awareness of the range and categories of support develops our understanding of key aspects of the student experience and suggests ways forward in developing collaborative approaches to effective university and non-university support structures.

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# Appendix

## Student support within HEIs: contexts of support and the nature of interaction

### Academic support

The nature of interaction	Contexts of support	
	Structured context (eg lecture or seminar)	Unstructured context (eg chance meeting in a corridor/coffee bar)
<b>Formal interaction (eg giving a lecture or seminar)</b>	Information given to students (eg within a lecture or seminar) on a specific academic topic.	Asking students, during a chance meeting, if they were able to find a specific reference.
<b>Informal interaction (eg general questions/chat about work)</b>	Chatting with students, at the beginning or end of a seminar, about how they are progressing with an essay.	Informally asking students, during a chance meeting, about how they are progressing with their work.

### Non-academic support

The nature of interaction	Contexts of support	
	Structured context (eg student support unit or lecture/seminar)	Unstructured context (eg chance meeting in a corridor/coffee bar)
<b>Formal interaction (eg giving instructions or information, for instance about university procedures)</b>	Formal assessment for DSA. Advice given to a student on procedures to follow if work is likely to miss a deadline.	Advice given to student, during a chance meeting, on the procedures to follow if work is likely to miss a deadline.
<b>Informal interaction (eg general questions/chat about student's welfare)</b>	Chatting with students at the end of a seminar or structured meeting about how they are settling in.	Informally asking students during a chance meeting about their welfare.

from Jacklin and Robinson (2007: 120)