Student Support via Other Students

Student Proctors: A Peer Support System

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Abstract

The date of the formal introduction of student proctors within the Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences is unclear. However, we have certainly been using student proctors for more than ten years. The purpose is to offer students the opportunity to learn from their peers in a one-to-one situation. Within the Faculty three departments have a student proctor programme each of which runs in much the same way but with differences which reflect the different custom and practice of each department.

The Execution

Student Proctors were introduced in the Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences in the early 1990's. The aims of this service were to:

- provide students with an additional level of academic support i.e. beyond that provided by staff.
- allow students to learn from their peers in a one-to-one situation.

Proctors are appointed in the areas of Engineering, Computer Science and Mathematics. The number of proctors appointed each year varies between departments. In the 2001/2002 academic year there are 6 engineering proctors, 10 computer science proctors and 1 mathematics proctor. These numbers reflect the number of undergraduate students studying in each of these subject areas.

The mechanism for appointing proctors also varies between departments. In Engineering and Mathematics adverts are placed on the student notice boards in the summer term inviting applications from second year undergraduate students for posts commencing in the following autumn term. Candidates are required to have an appropriate academic background, e.g. a first class or upper second class profile to date, appropriate personal skills, e.g. be well organised, be able to communicate clearly, be patient with students with difficulties and to have an interest in helping others. All applicants are interviewed by staff and appointments are made shortly afterwards. In Computer Science a different system is used. Here, students with an interest in becoming proctors are invited to help out at programming practical sessions in the spring and summer terms of their second year. Those showing a particular aptitude for this work are then short listed, interviewed and appointed early in the following autumn term.

Each proctor is usually available for 2 or 3 hours each week. Details of their location and availability are published on the student notice boards. At these times the students requiring help can see the proctors on a drop-in basis i.e. without an appointment. In Engineering and Mathematics the proctors attempt to provide support on any technical problem in their subject area. In Computer Science the support is more specialised i.e. the proctors provide help only in specific subject areas e.g. particular programming languages. The proctors are not expected to be able to deal with every problem they are given. In all departments experienced academic staff are available to provide backup to the proctors when required.

The introduction of proctors has been a success and evidence shows that students make good use of the service, especially approaching coursework deadlines and examinations. The support provided by the student proctors is often different from that provided by academic staff, i.e. the proctors have usually been through the same courses as those seeking help and can often bring a different perspective to each problem.

What Support Was Needed?

The training given to proctors at the beginning of the year is limited. They are usually briefed about their role by the supervising member of staff and given formal terms of reference. The proctors are asked to report any problems arising to this member of staff so that they can be dealt with. This system has proved to be successful.

The Barriers

No major barriers have been identified with this system.

The Enablers

To encourage students to make use of the proctors adverts are placed on the student notice boards. In the Department of Mathematics the proctor also meets with students on all years of the scheme at the beginning of the academic year to explain their role, publicise the service and to inform the students when and where they will be available.

Evidence of Success

The operation of the proctor service is monitored carefully by staff in each Department. Records are kept of the number of students using the service, the nature of their problems and the details of the help they are given. In Engineering and Computer Science this information is reviewed regularly by staff to ensure that the system is viable, i.e. it is being used and is running successfully. In the Department of Mathematics the student proctor is required to provide a written report on the operation of the system twice each year to the committee that oversees the operation of the Mathematics Degree. All the reports received so far indicate that the system is used by students and is relatively problem free.

How Can Other Academics Reproduce This?

A student proctor service is relatively easy to set up. A member of staff is required in each department to initiate the system and to oversee its operation. The proctors also need to have a base so that they are easily accessible to students. This can be an office, a drop-in centre or a teaching laboratory. The main expense involved is the wages paid to the proctors. In the Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences the proctors are paid on a hourly basis at the current rate of £5.32 per hour.

Quality Assurance

The operation of the student proctor service is described in the Annual Monitoring and Evaluation Reports written by the Course Leaders of the degree schemes run by the faculty. These reports are considered in detail each year by the Faculty Academic Quality Committee to ensure that any problems associated with the schemes, e.g. with the student proctor service, have been addressed adequately.

Other Recommendations

If a student proctor service is introduced it is essential that:

- The service is not used as a replacement for the traditional academic support provided by staff e.g. lectures, tutorials, etc.
- The staff responsible for the service are committed to its successful operation.
- Only proctors with the appropriate personal and academic qualities are appointed. Students are unlikely to make use of a service which is provided by proctors who are unsympathetic or who have weak academic backgrounds.
- Adequate resources are made available i.e. staff time, money and an appropriate meeting place.
- The operation of the service is monitored carefully by staff so that problems can be dealt with as soon as they arise.