

The Study Support Centre, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

Donna Ellis ■ Study Support Centre ■ The Robert Gordon University

Abstract

The Study Support Centre (SSC), within the Robert Gordon University (RGU), aims to provide students with assistance in Mathematics, Writing & Communication skills, Information & Communication Technology applications, Statistics, Study Skills and support for dyslexic students. The SSC offers students independent assistance through individual and small group tuition outwith their normal programme of study, as well as Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) packages, specialist software for special needs students and text based self-learning materials. The SSC has created a basic mathematics diagnostic assessment, which we give to first year students in many Schools. Currently, in collaboration with the School of Engineering, an engineering principles diagnostic assessment is being designed and implemented.

The Execution

There is an increased need to support students throughout their Higher Education, because of the trend towards wider participation and employers' increasing demand for vocationally apt students. Due to these trends and life long learning, students now enter the system with more varied qualifications and experiences, hence the need for support.

Within the former Faculty of Science and Technology at the Robert Gordon University (RGU) it was identified that a support mechanism was needed for their students at risk of dropping out or failing due to poor knowledge of mathematics. As a result the Mathematics Learning Support Centre (MLSC) was founded back in May 1996. Within two years, students displayed and lecturers highlighted concerns of weaknesses in other areas. In October 1998 the MLSC became the Student Learning Support Facility (SLSF), expanded in size, subject base and student base offering support to the entire University. In 2001 the department changed its name again to The Study Support Centre (SSC) because of the stigma that is associated with 'Learning Support'. At present support is provided in terms of assistance with Writing and Communication Skills, Information & Communication Technology applications, Study Skills techniques as well as with Mathematics and Statistics, plus support is provided for dyslexic students. The SSC tutors are available at three campuses, where students can either drop in to use the Centre's facilities or arrange an appointment.

The SSC offers students independent assistance outwith their normal programme of study. The Centre uses a holistic approach to its support by informally assessing a student's individual needs and attempts to adopt a teaching/learning style that suits that student.

The Centre has a friendly informal environment, which is open for use by the students in a variety of ways. Students can gain support through a variety of methods:

- Individual tuition
- Workshop
- Group tuition
- CAL software
- Diagnostic Assessments
- Video Assisted Learning (VAL) material
- Text-based material (worksheets & textbooks)

Students mainly request personal or small group tuition and access to our study area and computers, which provides a quiet place for students to work with the advantage of a tutor being available at most times.

The SSC has created a basic mathematics diagnostic assessment, which we give to first year students in many Schools at the commencement of their course. Currently, in collaboration with the School of Engineering, we are designing and implementing an engineering principles diagnostic assessment. Both assessments are delivered over the network. Results are fed back to students, their personal tutors and lecturing staff. These reports indicate students' strengths and more importantly, weaknesses needing addressing at a very early stage. Furthermore it allows course tutors and the SSC to make appropriate provisions.

Students are informed about the SSC during induction days along with email messages, plasma board displays and projected presentations (which are displayed throughout the year). Students can either drop in to the Centre or make an appointment. We advise the students to arrange an appointment to ensure that there is a tutor or the facilities are available. Tutors can refer students. Attendance is on a voluntary basis; therefore even if a student is referred they may decide not to obtain any help. As normal, the students who desperately need the help tend not to appear and generally disappear out of the system.

What Support Was Needed?

Fortunately the staff at the Centre have had experience of the content of courses and the common difficulties students encounter. However collaborative support is required from the lecturing staff, especially if they refer students, to inform the Centre's staff of the needs of students with respect to their course materials and any special requirements. Furthermore, University staff should be informed of the function, the facilities available and what can be expected of such a Centre.

The Barriers

Ensuring that staff and students are aware that RGU has a department dedicated to supporting students throughout their studies can be difficult. It is apparent that the Centre has not been fully integrated into the learning ethos of the University. A large variety of publicity mechanisms are used to advertise the SSC from posters to presentations and emails.

It is considered that the SSC teaches 'thinking' skills. There is a learning culture barrier, especially amongst students who have recently finished their Secondary Education, who have inappropriate academic, craft and thinking skills.

The Enablers

Word of mouth has been the Centre's most successful promotion mechanism. Generally, if a student visits the Centre, more often than not, they will return and usually with more students in tow or a student will visit because a peer has recommended it. A great amount of effort is put into promoting the Centre to both students and staff. It is beneficial to create good links with other support mechanisms (both internal and external) and to establish a good rapport with both students and staff.

Many difficulties are not just specific to an individual subject such as mathematics. The Centre expanded its subject base, adopting a holistic approach to its support. The Centre has helped students to identify the areas in their study where they have difficulties and provides guidance on how to overcome them and become more effective students.

Evidence of Success

Both students and staff praise the Centre on its efforts in assisting them to improve the University experience of the students. Positive feedback has been received in the Centre's evaluation forms. Students have been known to further comment about the value of the Centre in Course evaluation forms and during external assessment procedures.

Students comment that the Centre "is the place to come and ask your stupid questions and get a proper answer, rather than asking your lecturers and getting the 'well really you should know that'. Brilliant"; and that at later stages they no longer need to visit the Centre because we have improved their basic skills, enabling them to study effectively and independently. Lecturers value the Centre's facilities since they spend less time dealing with students' basic maths difficulties. Details of students who use the SSC are logged and tracked. Analyses have been conducted comparing students who have used the Centre or not and students who entered the University through an Access course or not.

How Can Other Academics Reproduce This?

To establish a Centre many factors have to be considered and implemented.

- Determine the requirements for a Centre. Involve a broad cohort of team members from across the University to ensure the Centre meets the needs of the range of students and its focus/influences do not become too narrow. The SSC makes use of a steering group for overall views and ideas and a management group when making detailed decisions.
- The location(s) of a Centre should be easily accessible by all students.
- Setting up a Centre will require the recruitment of staff (tutoring staff all had teaching experience/qualifications), and procurement of office equipment, teaching/learning equipment and materials.
- Ensure the entire population of the University is aware of the Centre and its functions.
- Use a variety of methods and mediums to recruit students.
- Determine how the Centre will be funded and sustained. At the Robert Gordon University, the University funds the SSC.

Quality Assurance

Annual reports are produced which state the progress and developments of the Centre. Targets are set at the beginning of each year based upon the figures and achievements of the previous session. These include setting goals for the number of students we help and hours spent assisting students. Student numbers and tutoring hours are closely monitored for each tutor, subject and teaching/learning/support method.

Other Recommendations

- Maintain an environment conducive to learning. The SSC has a friendly and inviting atmosphere, enabling students to be at ease so that they feel that no matter how trivial or complex their problem is that it is important and even if staff cannot help they will provide guidance on where to go for support.
- Endeavour to make students more independent and responsible for their own learning.
- The performance of the Centre should be regularly reviewed with its strengths and factors of weakness being identified.
- Teaching and learning techniques need to be kept up-to-date.
- Feedback from both students and staff should be considered and acted upon where necessary.

References

A Structured Approach to Undergraduate Mathematics Enhancement. *Paper presented at the Adults Learning Mathematics (ALM) 7th Annual Conference*, Tufts University, Boston/Medford, Massachusetts, USA, Ellis, D., (2000).

The Study Support Centre; <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/subj/mlsc/> (12-09-02).