

A Critical Examination of the Effectiveness of Faculty-based Student Learning Support

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Abstract

This thesis presents an investigation into the effectiveness of faculty-based student learning support and comprises three volumes. Volume 1 provides an overview of the background literature, research methodology, ethical and reliability considerations linked to two projects whose overarching theme is the support and improvement of the student experience. The overview begins with an outline of the aim of this thesis, followed by a synopsis of the literature concerning student support in higher education and the use of technology to support learners. The methodological framework is then discussed and a brief introduction to the projects is provided. The overview concludes with an exploration of the effectiveness of faculty-based student learning support and the presentation of a new blended approach to the organisation, delivery and typology of advising. This seeks to demonstrate the strength of a blended approach and thus makes a contribution to the practice, theory and method of supporting student learning.

Volume 2 discusses the Advice Shop project and considers the processes, methods and ethics of this student learning support. A summary of eight interventions is presented together with details of how the project was subsequently rolled out across the University. A consideration of the organisational model and personnel involved in student advising is also offered. The volume concludes with student and staff feedback and a discussion of how the project aims have been achieved. Evidence of the research output and components of practice relating to Project 1 can be found in Volume 2 Part 2.

Volume 3 presents a discussion of Project 2 - the use of technology to support learners. The project presents two technology-enhanced interventions - an electronic student attendance monitoring scheme, and the development of two online learner support tools using QuestionMark Perception as the delivery software. The methods and ethical considerations used to establish and implement these interventions are present together with feedback from students and staff. The volume concludes with a discussion of how the aims of the project have been achieved. Evidence of the research output and components of practice relating to Project 2 can be found in Volume 3 Part 2.

Portfolio Structure

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Abstract
Research Aim
Context
Introduction to the Projects
Summary of Research Outputs for Projects 1 and 2
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Methods of Data Collection
Research Rigour
Ethical Considerations
Conclusion
Contribution to Knowledge
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References

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Research outputs
Evaluative reports
Components of practice

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Evidence map of research output and components of practice
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 Context
 Methods
 Student Feedback
 Staff Feedback
Learner Support Tools
 Ethical considerations
 Methods
 Student Feedback
Effectiveness of Project Two
Conclusion of Project Two
References

Volume 3 Part 2 - Evidence of Project 2

Research output
Evaluative reports
Components of practice

VOLUME ONE - Overview

A Critical Examination
of the Effectiveness of
Faculty-based Student
Learning Support

Karen Fitzgibbon

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Research Aim

Student support in higher education institutions is widely acknowledged as being an important element of the debate concerning improved student retention and achievement. Addressing early student withdrawal, Tinto (1993) raised awareness of the need for student preparation and social integration. Many others, including Owen (2002), Zepke & Leach (2005), Fitzgibbon & Prior (2007) and Yorke & Longden (2007) have subsequently identified common causes of early student withdrawal and the role of student learning support in reducing the impact of such factors. The aim of this thesis is to investigate whether faculty-based student support provides an effective model of delivery for organising student learning support and guidance. To address the aim, this portfolio offers a range of evidence from two student learning support projects and describes the delivery model, responsive interventions and feedback from students and staff involved in the projects.

The projects have been informed by the literature on student retention and student learning support. Student retention can be viewed from two perspectives – the first being impact of student retention on the institution and its policies which might include factors such as the need to understand reasons why students withdraw, lost revenue, league table position, reputation and so on. The second viewpoint is that student retention is a moral and ethical concern and should concentrate on ensuring the wellbeing of all students to provide a positive higher education experience. Both the institutional and student centred perspectives are considered in this work.

The portfolio comprises three volumes – an overview of the research is presented in this volume together with a synopsis of the literature, introduction to the projects and an exploration of the effectiveness of faculty-based student support. Volumes 2 & 3 provide details of the projects and present evidence of the associated research output and components of practice. The next part of this overview provides details of the context within which the projects are located and a brief account of my professional development.

Context

The University of Glamorgan is located in Treforest, a small community on the outskirts of Pontypridd in Mid Glamorgan. From early beginnings as the School of Mines circa 1913, through transition into the Polytechnic of Wales (1975) and then to the University of Glamorgan in 1992, the institution has provided many with the opportunity to achieve academic distinction. The University also has a strong tradition of working within the community, providing outreach classes and working collaboratively with local schools and further education providers. It is also recognised for the work it does in respect of widening participation. Indeed, looking at the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) returns from one year before the Advice Shop was established to the present time shown in Table 1, it is possible to see the vast numbers of students from low participation neighbourhoods, or first generation participants that have successfully studied in higher education through the University's provision.

Table 1: Proportion of Glamorgan students within widening participation groups

HESA reports	From state schools or colleges			From NS-SEC Classes 4,5,6,7			Low Participation neighbourhoods		
	No. in group	%	Benchmark	No. in group	%	Benchmark	No. in group	%	Benchmark
2000/01	71	96	91	77	37	31	84	23	15
2001/02	65	97	93	69	39	32	81	26	16
2002/03	1205	97.8	92.9	410	39.3	34.7	390	28.6	16.2
2003/04	965	98.6	93.8	495	42.7	35.1	420	27.7	18.2
2004/05	785	97.3	91.1	275	38.2	33.1	430	33.9	17.5
2005/06	1595	98.2	94.3	450	41.4	35.5	385	29.4	17.6
2006/07	1905	98.4	93.9	520	42.0	36.2	330	16.2	11.5
2007/08	1850	98.6	93.5	560	39.2	35.4	295	14.1	12.0
2008/09	1880	98	94.1	-	-	-	300	14.5	11.9

Source data from: Higher Education Statistics Agency (2010b)

Introduction to the Projects

The projects comprising this portfolio are described in detail in Volumes 2 and 3 but a brief introduction is offered here. Project 1 involved the author in the establishment, organisation and delivery of a faculty-based advisory service for students. The Advice Shop was created in 2001 with the aim of providing advice and guidance to all students via a drop-in service. Volume 2 describes the context in which the Advice Shop operates and demonstrates how student's account of their experiences led to a range of interventions being introduced to support an improved experience for all. During my leadership of the Advice Shop (from its beginning in 2001 until September 2009) the service provided support and guidance to thousands of students and the University Directorate took the decision to rollout the Advice Shop model throughout the University in 2005. Volume 2 provides an account of the processes and interventions that were established. This includes an examination of the organisational and delivery models associated with the provision of advice in academic settings, including the use of Crookston's (1972) continuum of advising, to create a range of interventions using a blended approach. The research output associated with Project 1 is summarised in Table 2 overleaf and presented in full in Volume 2 Part 2.

Project 2 concerned the use of technology in the enhancement of student support and concentrates on two developments – the use of an electronic student attendance monitoring process, and the creation of two online learner support tools 'Early Days' and 'Study Health Check'. Student attendance monitoring was established as part of the Advice Shop provision and offered an opportunity to engage with students who were demonstrating signs of disengaging from their studies but who had not sought support. The way in which students were followed-up is described in detail in Volume 3, together with the framework for identifying which modules were chosen for inclusion in the electronic attendance monitoring scheme and student and staff feedback.

The learner support tools were designed to enhance the blend of delivery of advising methods developed in Project 1. The tools were created to enable students to self-assess their orientation and assimilation into their studies in a way which developed their independence and autonomy as learners. Volume 3 provides an account of the delivery

software (QuestionMark Perception) for the tools as well as the choice of questions and responses¹. The research output associated with the use of technology to support learners is summarised in Table 3 and presented in full in Volume 3 Part 2.

The journey leading towards the establishment of the projects stems from my interest in a positive student learning experience which has been part of my approach to learning and teaching throughout my academic career. My first teaching experience was as a part time tutor in a number of Adult Education Centres and Further Education Colleges and I began working at the Polytechnic of Wales in 1986 as a part time tutor in the department of Arts and Languages. My commitment to student centred teaching was soon in evidence with the introduction of a series of practical assessments in the form of a full-day simulation involving the organisation of a complex conference – an approach to assessment in higher education that was seen as innovative at that time.

Over the years my teaching practice and research interest in the student experience developed and I contributed to the literature on the creation of a strategy embedding professional and employability skills throughout a three year undergraduate degree (Fitzgibbon and McCarthy 1999) as well as the delivery of transferable skills in an online environment (Jones and Fitzgibbon 2002) and engaging students in reflection on their learning (Grey and Fitzgibbon 2003).

When the opportunity arose to establish the first student Advice Shop at the University of Glamorgan in 2001, I did not envisage the one year secondment post of Manager resulting in the next eight years working in the area of student retention and student advising. In preparing this portfolio and reflecting on my practice over that period, it is clear that the student centred approach I have employed in my teaching has extended to my approach in student support and this is demonstrated by the interventions described in Projects 1 and 2 and the associated evidence.

¹ A demonstration version of both tools is available online and the URLs are given in Volume 3 Part 2 items 66 and 67.

Table 2: Research Outputs for Project 1 – Faculty Advice Shops

Journal Articles

Tab No	Details	Personal Contribution
1	Fitzgibbon K & Prior D J, (2007) 'Students' early experiences and university interventions – a timeline to aid undergraduate student retention' <i>Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning</i> Vol 8, No 3 pp 17 -27	50%. Joint analysis of issues from student experiences and identification of interventions
2	Fitzgibbon K, Stocking S, Prior J, & Ayre M, (2009) 'Faculty Advice Shop Provision at the University of Glamorgan', <i>International Perspectives on the First-Year Experience in Higher Education, First Year Experience Monograph Series, National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina</i>	40%. Led co-ordination of contributions and produced first draft. Liaised with editor and led revisions.

Conference Papers

3	Fitzgibbon K & Prior D J (2003) 'Student Expectations and University Interventions – a timeline to aid undergraduate student retention' <i>LTSN BEST Annual Conference, Brighton UK 2003</i>
4	Fitzgibbon, K, Carter J, (2006) 'Using One-stop Shopping to Aid Student Retention' <i>The 1st European First Year Experience Conference, Teesside</i>
5	Fitzgibbon, K., Stocking, S., Prior, J., & Ayre, (2007) <i>How was it for you? Reflections on the first year of Faculty Advice Shop Provision at the University of Glamorgan. Second European First-Year Experience Conference, Gothenburg University, Sweden</i>
6	Fitzgibbon K (2009) <i>Fit for purpose: an institutional approach to student personal support. 3rd International Personal Tutoring and Academic Advising Conference: Improving student success, Liverpool, UK</i>
7	Fitzgibbon K & Harrett J (2009) <i>Telling Tales: Students' Learning Stories, Challenging Higher Education: knowledge, policy and practice, SRHE Annual Conference 8-10 December, Wales</i>

Invited Seminars

8	Fitzgibbon, K (2003) 'Student Advice Shop' <i>Do I stay or do I go? LTSN BEST Event, Glamorgan – co-hosted by Fitzgibbon & Prior</i>
9	Fitzgibbon, K, & Prior, J (2003) 'The Academic Perspective' <i>Joseph Rowntree Foundation Research Jury Day, Glamorgan</i>
10	Fitzgibbon, K (2004) 'Student Advice Shop' <i>LTSN BEST Event, University of Ulster</i>
11	Fitzgibbon, K (2004) 'Grasping the Nettle: interventions to support student retention' <i>Business School, University of Derby</i>
12	Fitzgibbon, K & Prior J (2004) 'Widening Participation & Student Retention at the University of Glamorgan' <i>Association of Business Schools, London</i>
13	Fitzgibbon, K (2004) 'Effective Intervention-based Retention Initiatives, <i>Consortium for Access to Legal Education, Glamorgan</i>
14	Fitzgibbon, K (2006) 'At Risk Groups: Transferring to Fail?' <i>Falling Down Ladders and Charming Snakes, Glamorgan</i>
15	Ayre, M, Davies L, Fitzgibbon K, Prior J, Stocking S (2008) 'Reflections on the first year of Faculty Advice Shop Provision, <i>CELT seminar, Glamorgan</i>

Table 3: Research Outputs for Project 2 - Use of Technology to Support Learners

Journal Articles		
Tab No	Details	Personal Contribution
43	Jones N & Fitzgibbon K (2002) 'For Better or Worse? The Marriage of Key Skills Development and On-line Learning' <i>Journal of Education and Vocational Training</i> Vol 54 No 3 pp395-411	50%. Significant contribution to content, drafts and revisions.
44	Fitzgibbon K & Jones N (2004) 'Jumping the Hurdles: challenges of staff development delivered in a blended learning environment' <i>Journal of Education Media</i> , Vol 29 Number 1 pp25-35	50%. Equal contribution to content, drafts and revisions
45	Newman-Ford, L.E, Fitzgibbon, K., Lloyd, S., Thomas, S.L. (2009) 'A large-scale investigation into the relationship between attendance and attainment: a study using an innovative, electronic attendance monitoring system' <i>Journal of Studies in Higher Education</i> , Vol 34, No 1	25%. Contributed to selection of topic and data shaping, reviewed drafts and final copy after revisions.
46	Fitzgibbon K & Prior D J, (2010) The Changing Nature of Students' Social Engagement with University, <i>Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education</i> , Vol 2 No 1 p26 - 32	50%. Equal contribution to content, drafts and revisions
47	Fitzgibbon K (2009) First Year Student Experience Wales – A Practice Guide, <i>Higher Education Academy</i>	70%. Leader of HEA First Year Experience Action Set. Created template for case studies, edited and compiled publication, made final design decisions prior to publication.
48	Jones, N., Blackey, H., Fitzgibbon, F., Chew, E., (2010) 'Get out of MySpace!', <i>Journal of Computers and Education</i> . Vol 54 p 776-782	10%. Provided some comparative data, reviewed drafts.
Peer Reviewed Conference Papers		
49	Fitzgibbon, K & Prior J, (2004) 'Is it worth it? An evaluation of a student attendance monitoring initiative' LTSN BEST Annual Conference, Edinburgh UK 2004	
50	Fitzgibbon K (2008) 'Student Engagement with Social Activities at University' ESCalate Conference, Stirling University	
51	Fitzgibbon K & Prior D J (2008) Helping Students Help Themselves, HEA Making Connections Conference, Middlesex University	
52	Prior J & Fitzgibbon K (2009) The changing nature of student social engagement with university. Higher Education Academy Annual Conference: The Future of the Student Learning Experience, Manchester University	
53	Fitzgibbon K (2010) The First Year Student Experience in Wales – a collaborative approach, ELFYSE, 23 March, Birmingham	
Invited Seminars		
54	Fitzgibbon K 'Encouraging Attendance?' HaSS Staff Seminar (2003)	
55	Fitzgibbon, K., Prior, J., & Stocking, S., (2007) Monitoring Student Attendance: Is it worth it? CELT seminar	
56	Fitzgibbon, K., Prior, J., & Stocking, S., (2008) How does monitoring student attendance contribute to improving student engagement? CELT Seminar, Glamorgan	
57	Fitzgibbon K Seminar for Law School Staff: Law Student Attendance	

The next part of this thesis offers a synopsis of the literature concerning the nature of support for learning in the context of this portfolio.

Background Literature

Student Retention in Higher Education

Post-compulsory education presents many hundreds of thousands of learners with the opportunity to enter further or higher education each year and the majority who enter higher education will succeed and achieve their desired outcome². However, there will be a proportion for whom autonomous or independent learning proves not to be as positive as they had hoped, and they will leave their course before completing it.

In higher education the desire to find out why some students do not complete their programme of studies, including the investigation of factors, the proposal of models, and the suggestion of changing practice, are grouped by many (Spady 1970: Spady 1971: Noel, Levitz et al. 1985: Tinto 1993: Tinto 1997: Yorke 1999: Moxley, Najor-Durack et al. 2001: Archer, Hutchings et al. 2003: Fitzgibbon and Prior 2007: Yorke and Longden 2007: Crosling, Thomas et al. 2008) under the umbrella term 'student retention'.

In some parts of the literature, a deficit discourse is apparent which equates student non-completion with failure. Negative terminology such as *drop outs* imply that students who withdraw have achieved nothing during their higher education studies, something that Quinn et al. (2005) challenged. Their study detailed a large sample population drawn from five universities in the UK and found that the majority of those who had left their studies early expressed positive aspects of their time at university. Lawrence (2002) calls for an understanding of multiple discourses to create a positive learning environment for all groups of students. Bartram (2009) contrasts humanistic, instrumental and therapeutic approaches to student support in an attempt to encourage institutions to consider their cultural discourses in this area whilst Watson (2010: 3) suggests there are four pathologies linked to recent debate about the student experience, these being: 'nostalgia and selective memory; condescension and disappointment; moral panic and pulling up the ladder; and contradictory expectations.'

² The most recently published Higher Education Statistics Agency figures show a completion rate of 89.9% for UK higher education students.

Whilst much of the literature discusses student retention using familiar terminology such as 'drop out' (Spady 1970: Tinto 1993), 'stop out' (Tinto 1982: Yorke 1999), 'attrition' (Noel, Levitz et al. 1985), there is less agreement on the composition of groups contained within these terms. Mallette and Cabrera (1991: 182) noted that including 'all those students who failed to reenroll at the institution under analysis' as non-continuing was unlikely to represent an accurate picture. Seidman (2004) Yorke (1999) and van Stolk, Tiessen, Clift and Levitt (2007) highlight the significant number of students who change course and continue in another institution without a break in their studies, but who are nevertheless counted as withdrawn.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) definition of student 'non-continuation' does not recognise students who may suspend their studies for a year (also known as stop outs) but who then return and complete their studies successfully (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2010a). This is reinforced by Slack and Noble (2006) who report on a study by Quinn et al. (2005) and suggest that the system of measuring retention by imposing a four year completion devalues those students who choose to take longer but who nevertheless complete their studies. Turner (2004) and Seidman (2004) call for another look at how institutions view those students who take longer to complete their studies, questioning the view that all students will pass through higher education by starting and finishing their courses at the same time without deviating from these expected norms.

In their report offering an international comparison of student retention in higher education in Ireland, Australia, the United States and the Netherlands, van Stolk et al. (2007) set out the definitions of student retention for each of the four participating countries, as there was no common definition in use. Similarly, Nutt & Calderon (2009) have provided a contextualised picture of differing retention practices across the world in their international review of first year experiences in higher education. This emphasises the point that although there is significant period of time between Spady (1970) asserting the need for a common definition, and the work of Nutt & Calderon (2009) a universally agreed and applied definition of student retention in higher education remains elusive. Thus, there is continuing confusion over the composition of groups contained within terms such as attrition, retention, drop outs, stop outs and so on. In turn, this leads to misunderstanding and unwitting misrepresentation when making comparative studies or testing models and

theories, as comparison is difficult with such ill-defined groups, casting doubt about the reliability of some findings.

Compounding the problems with definition of terms, some studies also report institutional issues with data accuracy as Quinn, Thomas et al. (2005: 11) noted when discussing methodological issues:

‘However, even for those who were most confident and persistent in using the university data, the facilitators [researchers] faced some insuperable problems caused by the inaccuracy of the data provided....Many of the ex-students listed as under 25 were not.....some had never been undergraduates or had not dropped out, raising serious concerns about university data collection and its use.’

The literature also provides models and methods of data collection and interpretation (Dey and Astin 1993: Allen and Harrop 2005: Parmar 2005: van Stolk, Tiessen et al. 2007). Yorke (1999) suggests the importance of collecting accurate data from robust systems as being paramount to an understanding of institutional performance in student retention as well as providing an appropriate base from which to launch student support initiatives. The methods used in Project 1 show how this was achieved at Glamorgan. Having discussed the issues concerning definition and accurate recording of student retention, the next part of this account will consider the factors impacting on student decisions to leave.

Contributory factors that cause some students to leave their studies early

The literature concerning contributory factors that cause some students to leave their studies early is rich and diverse, containing seminal works from Tinto (1987), Noel et al. (1985), Astin (1999) and notable contributions from Yorke (1999), Moxley et al. (2001), Archer et al. (2003), Yorke & Longden (2007) Robinson, Riche and Jacklin (2007) and Crosling et al. (2008).

Tinto’s theory of student departure was critiqued and challenged over time and he published a reworked version of his model in 1993 (Tinto 1993). The changes to the model had been informed by using updated and wider data samples which included students from

diverse backgrounds as well as attempting to make a stronger connection between classroom practice and the influence on college communities. Metz (2004) attributes the influence of challenges made by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concerning the inclusion of race and gender variables and Tierney (1992) concerning the underlying anthropological rites of passage theory, as key influences on Tinto's revisions. Yorke (1999:3) acknowledges the contribution that Tinto has made but comments that:

'Tinto's work has also been criticised by those who approach non-completion from an interactionist perspective....not enough attention is given to the perceptions of the students themselves which are held to be of critical importance when the need to decide whether or not to continue comes to the fore.'

Yorke's view is of particular relevance to the projects comprising this portfolio as the action research methodology (outlined later in this Volume) has ensured that the student voice is central to, and heard throughout, the projects.

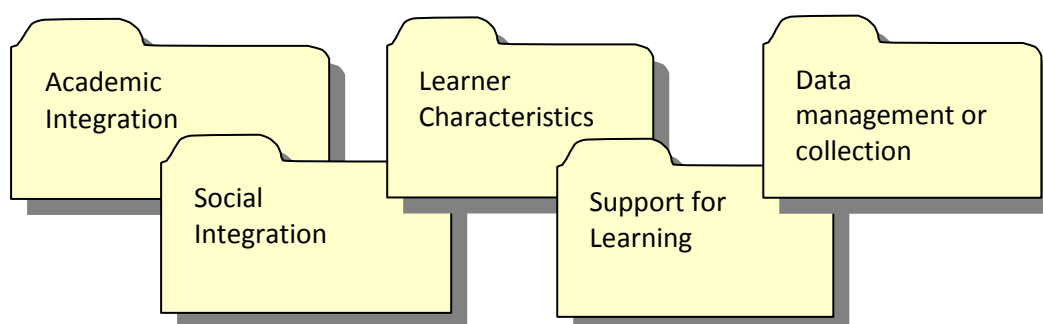
Tinto's model of social and academic integration has been further challenged by some who acknowledge the role that adaptation has in student retention. Zepke and Leach (2005: 47) posit that those in support of Tinto's model reinforce the practice of assimilating students into the college environment, whereas an emerging view is the role of institutional adaptation 'where institutions change to accommodate diverse students'. Spanier (2010) suggests that universities are only just beginning to consider how they should adapt to benefit student populations. However, in an article investigating the relationship between Tinto's work and Astin's (1999) theory of involvement (originally published in 1984 and reproduced in 1999) Milem & Berger (1997: 392) noted that Tinto did 'emphasize the importance of interactive behaviours between students and the campus environment(s)...' but that contributions from others 'have generally failed to include direct measures of these interactions.'

Notwithstanding criticism of Tinto's model described above the importance of academic and social integration continues to be acknowledged in student retention literature (Beder 1997: Rhodes and Nevill 2004: Wilcox, Winn et al. 2005: Crosling, Thomas et al. 2008: Fitzgibbon and Prior 2010).

As well as social and academic integration, three other themes appear consistently in the literature (see Fig 1) - learner characteristics that might indicate which students are at risk of

early withdrawal from study (Skahill 2002: Christie, Munro et al. 2004: Rodriguez and Cano 2007), enhanced support for learning which mitigates against the influence of risk factors (Gallagher and Allen 2000: Owen 2002: Karabenick and Newman 2006: Jacklin and Robinson 2007: Robinson, Riche et al. 2007), and data management or collection approaches which might provide more reliable institutional data (Dey and Astin 1993: Green, Brannigan et al. 1994: Parmar 2005: van Stolk, Tiessen et al. 2007: Yorke and Longden 2007).

Figure 1: Themes in retention literature



In conducting a review of the retention literature, I have used these themes as the main categories and grouped the literature into sub-themes within the main categories as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Expansion of themes in student retention literature

Theme	Sub-themes
Academic Integration	Classroom experience Student attendance Choice of course Inclusive curriculum Methods of learning and teaching
Social Integration	Facilitating social interaction Student attitudes to social activity Social interaction as a characteristic of persistence Social interaction and student involvement
Learner Characteristics	Lack of preparedness Expectations/perceptions of HE experience Persistence Involvement Social class Low/no A levels

Support for Learning	Multi-disciplinary nature of student support Student silence acting as trigger for support Advice and support services Student use of advice and support services Peer mentoring/buddying
Data management/collection	Measurement tools Systems Institutional data collection HESA performance indicators Definitions of student retention

Within the themes of *academic integration, social integration and learner characteristics*, the sub-themes often represent factors which are considered to contribute to a poor level of student integration with the institution and/or studies. This has led some studies to conclude students experiencing these factors are at risk of early withdrawal (Nicholl and Sutton 2001; Lawrence 2002; Christie, Munro et al. 2004). It is possible to separate the themes in Table 4 into those that fall within the institution's control - largely relating to the student learning experience; and those outside the institution's control which nevertheless affect the student's ability to study. Yorke and Longden (2007: 33) divided their data from a major study of the first year experience in higher education in the UK in a similar way, referring to the division as 'the locus of responsibility.' Where factors are outside of the institution's control, many HEI offer advice and support for students to help them address the issues they face, and this in turn can improve the chances of the student continuing with (and completing) their studies. Glogowska et al. (2007) suggest that early attempts to reduce students' reasons for leaving to a single factor are now being recognised as an oversimplification of a complex issue and that multiple factors often converge, leading to a tipping point influencing individual decisions to stay or leave a programme of study³. Similarly Kuh (2007: 7) resists calls to offer 'one thing we should do to increase student engagement and success' and instead proposes six 'conditions' which institutions are encouraged to consider, the underpinning essence of which is the need for interaction between academic staff and student peer groups.

Having contextualised the literature around student retention, definitions and groups, and offered an outline of the broad range of themes to be considered when discussing student

³ See the section 'Reasons Given for Withdrawal or Suspension of Study in the annual Advice Shop Operation Reports in Volume 2 Part 2 items 17-24

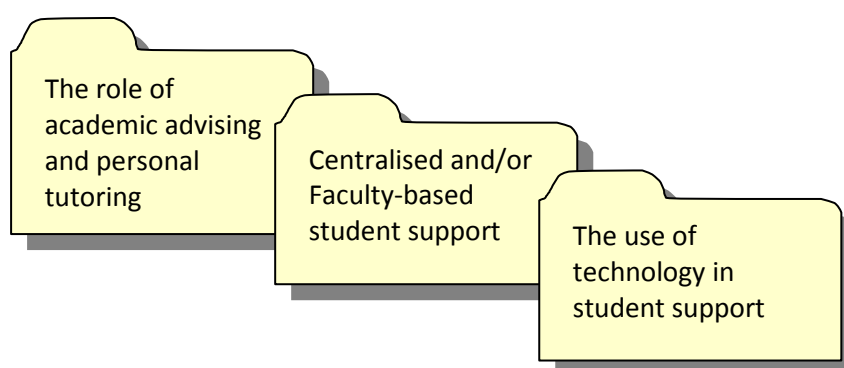
retention, the next part of this account concentrates on the literature concerning support for learning.

Support for Learning

The role of student support in student retention has become an established part of the literature (Blythman and Orr 2002: Wilmot and Lloyd 2002: Fitzgibbon and Prior 2007: Jacklin and Robinson 2007: Robinson, Riche et al. 2007: Crosling, Thomas et al. 2008: Kirk 2008) and is often the next step for institutions seeking ways to militate against the factors contributing to early withdrawal. This literature relates to both projects within this portfolio and underpins many of the interventions contained in Volumes Two and Three⁴.

My use of the term *support for learning* requires further definition. I have used it to include initiatives and services such as advice services (Gallagher and Allen 2000: Fitzgibbon and Carter 2006: Karabenick and Newman 2006: Fitzgibbon, Stocking et al. 2007: Fitzgibbon, Stocking et al. 2009); study centres providing guidance on academic study skills (Peelo 2002); support provided at programme level such as extra tutorial support, personal tutoring and academic advising systems (Gordon, Habley et al. 2000: Owen 2002: Bullock and Wikeley 2004); peer mentoring; and institutional policies designed to support specific groups such as first year orientation programmes (Wallace 2003). To further review the support for learning literature in the context of this portfolio I have focused on three areas:

Figure 2: Support for learning literature in the context of this portfolio



⁴ For the connections between the interventions and the literature see Table 5 in Volume 2 and Tables 5 & 10 in of Volume 3.

The role of academic advising and personal tutoring in support for learning

The role of academic advising is considered to be highly effective in the contribution it makes to the student experience and to student retention (Crockett 1985: Gordon, Habley et al. 2000: Alexitch 2006). Light (2001: 81) suggested that 'Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience.' In the United States there is a considerable body of practice and literature concerning the role of academic advisor and it is helpful to consider the development and context of the role. Frost (2000: 7) offers a concise historical overview from the late 19th century when changes in higher education impacted on the tutor-pupil relationship such that 'At best, historical ideals about the teacher guiding the learner had become obscured; at worst, they had been lost.' She tracks the development of academic advising through to the 1930s when most institutions in the US had developed organised advising programs (Frost 2000: 8) and ends with the development of academic advising into an 'organised profession' in the 1970s and the formation of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in 1979 (Frost 2000: 11).

Academic advising in the US continues to play a significant role in the orientation, integration and success of students in higher education. Students are assigned an academic advisor to guide them through their academic choices such as which major to choose, as well as providing one to one mentoring support and guidance about career choices. Professional associations (such as NACADA) provide a wealth of resources and guidance including a set of core values and methods for evaluating institutional or personal performance in advising (NACADA 2004).

Perhaps the most comparable equivalent role in UK HE is the role of personal tutor - someone with regular and frequent contact with a small number of students in whose academic and personal welfare they take great interest. Earwaker (1992) describes the origins of the role in UK higher education from its roots in the Oxford and Cambridge tutorial system where the tutor acted *in loco parentis* 'and possibly be as concerned to monitor his behaviour as a young gentleman as to encourage his intellectual development.' (Earwaker 1992: 45).

In the UK, particularly in the post-92 universities, the personal tutor role has changed considerably from the Oxbridge traditions. Although still concerned with providing pastoral care, the one-to-few model has often been replaced by a one-to-many provision partly due to increasing student numbers (Earwaker 1992: Peelo 1994). Grant (2006: 13) considers whether the impact of the diverse nature of the student body together with worsening staff student ratios, modularization and pressures of administration and research has led to 'staff resistance to personal tutoring of a non-academic nature.' He nevertheless found that whilst there were concerns about the ability of academic staff to cope with the demands of personal tutoring, 'some form of compulsory personal tutor system remains the norm, particularly in the pre-1992 institutions....' (Grant 2006: 14).

Owen (2002) found that student and staff expectations of the personal tutoring system were very different, quoting one tutor who stated '[personal tutoring provides a] useful function in integrating a lot of modules and holding together what can be a very disparate experience' (Owen 2002: 13). Contrastingly, '*students overwhelmingly saw that personal tutors were for 'problems', albeit those that impinged on academic progress: no problems, no contact*' (Owen 2002: 13). Thomas (2006b: 24) found that the personal tutor role is particularly important in helping widening participation students integrate with the culture of higher education 'Personal tutors can act as a bridge between students and the institution to help break down perceived barriers, and integrate them into the higher education community of staff and students.'

Whilst Owen (2002) highlights some issues in an understanding of the personal tutor role between staff and students in UK higher education, a review of the literature in this area continues to demonstrate both an expectation of and a need for personal support for students. There is little to suggest that distinct student groups (part time, postgraduate) have differing personal tutoring requirements although the needs of widening participation (Thomas 2006b) and mature students (Grant 2006) do receive attention. Hixenbaugh, Pearson and Williams (2006) found that students felt the provision of an appointment to see their tutor was useful rather than a drop-in approach. This is interesting because it goes against other studies (Earwaker 1992) which have shown that requiring an appointment for support raises or escalates the problem in the student's eyes, and that they prefer drop-in support. One reason for this difference may be that students in both the Hixenbaugh et al. (2006: 53) and Wilcox et al. (2005) studies mentioned that they felt their problem wasn't

serious enough to interrupt their personal tutor and that having a pre-set appointment gave them space to raise such queries. In the very specific case of personal tutoring it seems that pre-set appointments may increase the volume and success of the personal tutoring system.

Although the method of delivering personal support and guidance in higher education may differ appreciably between the US and UK, it is nevertheless apparent that academic advising makes a significant contribution to student retention. This is particularly relevant for Project 1 and there is a clear connection between such literature and the establishment of the Faculty Advice Shop. Alexitch (2006: 192) notes that ‘..an established, developmental advising relationship with faculty and frequent faculty-student contact has been linked to a reduction in student attrition...’ and this confirmation of the success of advice services when linked to student retention is apparent in other studies. These include Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali and Pohlert (2003: 260) whose hypothesis that ‘Students who regularly use student support services will have higher levels of academic and social adjustment than students who do no [sic] use the support services’ was found to be significant in their subsequent findings: ‘students with increased support on campus did appear to be better adjusted to college life.’ Simpson (2006) compared student retention figures for the Open University at a time when the personal tutor system was eliminated and then when it was reinstated. He found that there was a worsening in both student retention and progression during the period when personal tutors were eliminated and suggests that although it might be difficult to make a definitive link to the removal of personal tutors, the university had not made other changes during that period. It is interesting to see that the need for staff to support students is a current source of discussion with Spanier (2010: 93) suggesting the need for academic staff to ‘take a more active role in advising students’ in a very recent study.

Grayson et al. (1998) explored reasons why students don’t seek help from tutors. Several factors were identified including the power relationship between tutor and student, embarrassment about not coping and not wanting the tutor to know, loss of motivation for study and fear about repercussions of telling the tutor as it could seem insulting. This in turn reinforces the need for academic advice to be available from academics who have knowledge of the faculty programmes, but don’t have a direct tutor/student relationship with the help-seeker. Grayson (1998: 244) also suggests that ‘clear statements that certain people are there to help if necessary, seem to have been appreciated....’ and the point that ‘students do *not* realize how many of their colleagues are also struggling with their

work...and mistakenly believe that if they were to ask for help they would be the only one to do so' further reinforces the need to be open with students about anticipating difficulties⁵ and all the support available to them if they encounter problems.

Whatever the model of support, it seems apparent that students continue to seek and value personal support whilst studying at university. Thomas (2006b: 26) describes the emergence of 'hybrid professional models...for example one-stop-shops and professional advisers based in academic departments' pointing to the sharing of services and links between student services provision (such as counselors and financial advisers) together with specialist staff such as accommodation advisers and faculty staff. The consideration of such hybrid models is of immediate relevance given the projects comprising this portfolio and consideration of the literature concerning the merits of faculty or centralised student support models follows.

Centralised or faculty based student support

The literature concerning student academic support considers a variety of models from centralised (Gordon, Habley et al. 2000) through to faculty or departmentally based support (Gallagher and Allen 2000) and course or programme level provision (Owen 2002: Thomas 2006b). Foster et al. (2002) argue that a combination of support provision offers advantages over a single 'one size fits all' approach, and Pardee (2000: 193) proposes that it is possible to view student support provision as 'a continuum from centralisation to decentralisation'.

Advantages and disadvantages for the extent of centralisation or decentralisation are also contained in the literature. Crockett's (1985) view is that centralisation offers a wider range of services, greater consistency of service and ease of monitoring and evaluation. He considers the cost of such services to be a disadvantage. Marr and Aynsley-Smith (2006) regard the advantages of centralisation as establishing professional codes of practice, consistent management structures and mutual support. They deem the disadvantages to include the remoteness from students and staff and the impact on both groups of lack of awareness of such services. Thomas (2006b) states that the availability of the services is an advantage of the centralised model, but considers that the reactive nature of the centralised service to students means that students who are reluctant to seek help may never be

⁵ A summary of the intervention 'Realities of Degree Study' is given in on page 19 of Volume 2 and the slides can be found in Volume 2 Part 2 item 35.

identified as needing support⁶. Manning, Kinzie and Schuh (2006) offer a different perspective, that of the management difficulties associated with bureaucratic centralisation and how this can lead to poor communication and loss of focus.

As an alternative to strictly centralised and decentralised models Pardee (2000: 196) uses the term 'shared models' to describe the mix 'between department advisors ... and staff in a central administrative unit.' Manning et al. (2006: 59) argue that 'Student affairs practice is often, if not always, a hybrid or combination of different models.'⁷

The advantages and disadvantages of these delivery models do not include a consideration of the impact of such models on student retention. A compelling argument for a decentralised model - or a shared model which includes faculty-based advisors - is made by Gordon (1985: 127) as follows:

'It has been demonstrated that quantity and quality of faculty-student interaction has a direct impact on retention....perhaps because interaction with faculty increases social and academic integration. If there is an active, involved, ongoing relationship between students and faculty advisers, a faculty advising system can be an important ingredient in the retention process.'

This view is reinforced by Noel (1985: 9)

'Too often retention activities are carried out almost exclusively by student services, even though it is now clear that the key people on campus in a retention effort are those on the academic side of the institution...'

In a more recent inquiry, Pan, Guo, Alikonis and Bai (2008) conducted a multi-level longitudinal study to determine the effect that six intervention programmes had on student retention and success. They found that programmes giving support early in the first year impacted positively on retention and academic assistance, social and academic integration programmes impacted positively on achievement. Foster, Houston, Knox and Rimmer (2002: 12) hold the view that 'While it is unrealistic to expect to eliminate student withdrawal, there is emerging evidence that a range of institutional interventions may be effective in reducing current levels.' Whilst Foster et al. (2002) suggest there is evidence of

⁶ For a consideration of how silence acts as a trigger for support in Project 2, see page 2 Volume 3

⁷ The connection between this literature and the organisational model employed in Project 1 is outlined in Volume 2 on page 26

effectiveness emerging, there is significantly less published research in this area when compared with the volume of material compelling universities to institute appropriate programmes. Organisations like NACADA recommend methods and approaches to evaluate advisors and advising services; national surveys in the United States, more specifically the National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) do report on student evaluation of such services, but there is scope in the research literature for more to be done in this area.

Type of Advising

As well as a consideration of the organisational models of advising, the literature suggests that there should also be a clear strategy shaping the type of advising delivered to students. Crookston (1972) determined a continuum of advising from prescriptive, intrusive and developmental and the type of advising has a direct bearing on student autonomy and help seeking behaviours.

Prescriptive advising is where the student is directed to take specific action. Instances when prescriptive advising would be appropriate include for example a student seeking information to help them navigate their way around campus i.e. 'can you tell me where the Psychology labs are please?'. In this simple example the advisor would direct the student to the correct building (prescriptive) but would also make sure they have a campus map and point out where they currently are so that the student can navigate from there (developmental). Intrusive advising refers to the types of advising which are pushed to the student without being actively sought out. An example of intrusive advising is the electronic attendance monitoring system in Project 2⁸ which uses an intrusive model to contact students with a pattern of poor or changing attendance and offer guidance about resuming their studies.

Developmental advising applies to the majority of advising interviews. It refers to the way in which an advisor will encourage the student to make their own decisions about future actions by enabling them to develop good decision-making and help-seeking techniques. For example, a student may be implicitly looking to the advisor to make a decision about whether they should suspend their studies, reduce their modules, or make a complaint. The advisor will lay out all the options, and potential future scenarios such as the extra time it

⁸ See Volume 3 for a full description of this intervention

will take to complete their course in the first two examples, and the formal process for making a complaint in the third example. However, the advisor will not give any view of what action they would personally take. This is critical if the student is to determine their own future. It also helps to build student decision-making skills and develops their help-seeking behaviours by enabling them to see how they might resolve their own situation in a way they are comfortable with. If prescriptive advising was used in such situations, the student quickly becomes dependent on the advisor, and this disempowers the student from making future decisions or developing their own skills in dealing with problems⁹.

It is apparent that Crookston's (1972) continuum is a useful way to view the three types of advising because a single encounter with a student might move along the continuum within the same meeting. The student may have simple queries which an advisor would use prescriptive advising to resolve, and more complex ones requiring developmental advising. The student may be meeting with the advisor as a result of intrusive advising such as a tutor referral or attendance follow-up. In such an example (which would be relatively common) it can be seen that the advising continuum allows flexibility on the part of the advisor and ensures that appropriate techniques are used which enable an effective and appropriate relationship between student and advisor. The term appreciative advising, has emerged in recent years and can be seen as a blend between developmental advising and appreciative enquiry (Bloom and Martin 2002: Hutson 2010) .

The developmental model of advising has echoes in counselling literature and practice. Cameron (2008: 111) reinforces the importance of client action when she suggests '...letting clients know we see them as experts in their own lives.' In discussing the historical development of person-centred counselling approaches McLeod (2003) reflects on the start of this movement being attributed to Carl Rogers (1942) where 'it was suggested that the therapist could be of most help to clients by allowing them to find their own solutions to their problems' (McLeod 2003: 157).

Colledge (2002: 3) summarises the approach as follows:

'Whatever the theoretical approach, the emphasis in counseling is on increasing clients' responsibility for their own lives, so it is essential for them to make choices

⁹ Details of the advisory interview framework for Project 1 can be found on pages 3-6 of Volume 2.

that help them to feel, think and act effectively.....Counsellors have done their job when clients are equipped to help themselves when counselling ends.'

An effective way of using Crookston's continuum is by offering a mix of the three types of advising. Volumes 2 and 3 develop this mix by demonstrating how the interventions associated with Projects 1 and 2 sit within the framework provided by the continuum. Having identified the importance of using a range of advising techniques, it is also apparent that good advising equips the student with the skills and understanding to make their own decisions.

The final area of support for learning literature relevant to this portfolio is the effective use of technology.

The Use of Technology in Student Support

The literature concerning the use of technology in learning and teaching is vast, but the literature concerning the use of technology in student support is surprisingly limited. What there is appears divided into two areas: the type of technologies in use (McCauley 2000), and whether there is a place for technology in student advising and support (Leonard 2004). When considering the types of technology in use, it is unsurprising to see that basic technologies in everyday use such as email, electronic calendars and packages such as Microsoft Office are used in student support (Leonard 2004). More specialised systems such as student administrative record systems and degree audits are also evident (McCauley 2000) and there are a variety of commercially available packages for monitoring student attendance and engagement such as Onyx and ERS¹⁰.

The question of whether there is a place for technology in student support draws several conflicting views between those who consider the role of technology as one that 'liberate[s] the advisor from time-consuming, labor-intensive, and redundant activities' (McCauley 2000: 240) to those expressing concern 'I want to see students, not interface through E-mail.' (Leonard 2004: 29). The separation of these viewpoints may be further complicated by the demands of the students themselves. As we engage more and more in technology-enhanced (if not technology-led) teaching and learning, and enrol students, often referred to

¹⁰ Details of these systems can be found at http://www.telepenbarcode.co.uk/student_attendance_systems.htm for Onyx and <http://www.ers-online.co.uk/p1977/ers-barcoded-student-attendance-monitoring-system> for ERS

as digital natives (Prensky 2001: Prensky 2005), then advisors should be embracing the notion that good advising offers students guidance in ways they are most likely to access and use. Leonard (2008) expressed the view that the choice of technology for advising should be driven by student need, and not by advisors' views on whether technology is useful, which may be led by nothing other than the advisor's personal level of familiarity with technology. When considering the ways in which students use the internet Selwyn (2008) found that information searches for academic information surpassed searches for other types of information such as news, products and hobbies, clearly demonstrating the ways in which students like to find and use academic information. Knight (2010) sought to evaluate student learning strategies used when accessing VLE resources in an attempt to understand whether some learning strategies led to greater success. He found that students who used online resources consistently throughout the module - who he described as deep learners - achieved higher performance levels than those who used their online materials only at the beginning and end of the module. Crane (2009) offers a perspective on the level of familiarity which young people have for technology and how their immersion in the technological world raises their expectations about accessing digital resources. A further consideration for the use of technology in student support is offered by Sotto (2000) who suggests that it is not only distance learners who wish to access information electronically but that on-campus students wish to receive information in this way too.

Leonard's (2004) discussion of the results of a national staff survey of the use of technology in academic advising points to a further tension - some respondents commented that they felt technology had been imposed upon them, with little regard taken of either the likely contribution to successful advising, or of their own views and experiences in how such technology might enhance their roles.

Seeking to find a way to bring student demand and staff reluctance together, White (2005) offers a picture of a future where academic advising is enhanced by, but not replaced by, technology. Leonard (2008: 305) suggests that

'perhaps the best way to reach students... is not really in one way, but rather in multiple ways, through multiple methods that suit different learning styles, personalities, and opportunities for interaction... The more ways an advisor reaches out, the more likely it is that the advisor will reach more students...the use of technology in academic advising will not be a question of whether – it will be a question of how.'

It is interesting to reconnect this point with the question of institutional adaptation or assimilation discussed earlier (page 11) and to consider whether advisors are adapting to the needs of students or are they requiring student to assimilate to the chosen model of provision. Leonard's view is particularly significant given the mix of advising delivery methods presented in this portfolio - from face to face to online. The use of learning technology adapted for use in student support is outlined in the learner support tools of Project 2 described in Volume 3.

This literature review has attempted to offer a contextualisation of the literature relating to the projects comprising this portfolio. The next part of this volume presents the overarching methodological framework applied to the projects and demonstrates how an action research approach has provided significant evidence upon which a range of interventions have been based.

Overview of Research Approach

This section presents an overview of the research approach used for the projects contained within this portfolio. It includes the methodology, a summary of data collection methods, an overview of the ethical framework of the projects and assurances of research rigour.

Lenses of Research

All forms of social research, offer multiple ways to practice research. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 3) indicate that there are three important lenses through which to examine research practices (a) scientific and positivistic methodologies; (b) naturalistic and interpretive methodologies; (c) methodologies from critical theory. The choice of which lens one uses to view research is largely based on conceptions of social reality as described by Burrell and Morgan (1979).

Consideration of the conception of social reality provides an understanding of the researcher's personal world view, which in turn influences the structure of their research. The researcher must examine their beliefs about the structure of the social world such as '...is social reality external to individuals imposing itself on their consciousness from without – or is it the product of individual consciousness? ...is it a given 'out there' in the world, or is it created by ones' own mind?' (Cohen, Manion et al. 2000: 5). The purpose of revealing one's personal world view is to understand how such a view might impact upon the research to be undertaken. Crotty's (2003: 66) explanation neatly sums up the journey of understanding that this can open up for the researcher:

'...whenever one examines a particular methodology, one discovers a complexus of assumptions buried within it. It is these assumptions that constitute one's theoretical perspective and they largely have to do with the world that the methodology envisages. Different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world.'

For researchers with a nominalist world view, understanding of the social world is achieved by using terms, phrases or descriptions to provide a structure for reality (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Researchers with a view of reality where things exist independently of the ability to categorise or describe them (Cohen, Manion et al. 2000) have an ontological perspective of realism.

To identify one's epistemology – a personal understanding of how we know what we know - the researcher considers whether knowledge is positivist - 'hard, objective and tangible' (Cohen, Manion et al. 2000: 6) or whether knowledge is anti-positivist - 'personal, subjective and unique.' (Cohen, Manion et al. 2000: 6).

The projects comprising this portfolio concern human experience and personal growth and the theoretical approach used is therefore one that gives the researcher scope for using a qualitative approach based on students' personal accounts and experiences. This approach is necessarily subjective; demands a nominalist ontology where understanding of the world is created by exposure to cultural values; is generally interpretivist in its epistemology and adopts largely naturalistic research techniques. In this way, it acknowledges Park's (2006) view that the researcher comes to the research as human being with a history and a future as well as a sense of what their personal preferences are.

Interpretive paradigm

Locating my research in the subjectivist dimension brings an opportunity to explore the nature of the interpretive paradigm. Burrell and Morgan (1979) argue that this paradigm consists of four separate connected elements being solipsism, phenomenology, phenomenological sociology, and hermeneutics. The shared primary concern of theorists locating their research within the interpretive paradigm 'is to understand the subjective experience of individuals' (Burrell and Morgan 1979: 253). This makes it possible to view action research as an extension of such a concern, although there is a movement towards seeing action research as part of an ontologically separate participatory world view (Reason and Bradbury 2006a). For the purposes of my research however, the use of action research methodology within the interpretive paradigm allows the exploration of individual experience as part of a cycle of reflection and action in and on practice and the next part of this account seeks to articulate the appropriateness of the action research methodology for the projects in this portfolio.

Chosen Model of Action Research

For the purposes of my research the use of action research methodology allows the exploration of individual experience as part of a cycle of reflection and action in and on practice. Action research has multiple approaches and is defined in many ways (Kemmis 1982: Dick 1999: Cohen, Manion et al. 2000). Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) present an

overview of seven forms of action research: participatory, critical, classroom, action learning, action science, soft system approaches and industrial action research. This demonstrates the breadth of approaches which exist under the common term of action research, and although there is variance in the plurality of definitions, there are common characteristics in each of them.

Greenwood and Levin determine these common characteristics as 'action, research and participation' (Greenwood and Levin 2007: 5) and go further in suggesting that whilst research may contain some of these characteristics, 'Unless all three elements are present, the process may be useful but it is not AR' (Greenwood and Levin 2007: 5). There is common ground amongst many in sharing a view that action research must contain these elements, particularly if 'action' is also taken to mean the focus on research as practice (Kemmis 1982: Waterman 1995: Dick 1999: Stringer 1999: Park 2006: Greenwood and Levin 2007). Similarly, common ground is found in the ways in which action research is seen to bring together theory and practice (Stringer 1999: Reason and Bradbury 2006a: Greenwood and Levin 2007: Stringer 2007) and indeed Kemmis (1988) attributes this as one of the reasons for the resurgence in popularity of action research methodology in education research, coming at a time when debate about the appropriateness and usefulness of much education research was being debated, see for example Hammersley (1997) and Hargreaves (1997). The role of research as a characteristic in action research also includes the role of the practitioner as a researcher and the value of reflective practice is apparent here (Kemmis 1988: Waterman 1995: Reason and Bradbury 2006b). The third common element that of participation, concerns the way action research treats the people involved in such studies and a deeper consideration of the role of participants is given on pages 33-36.

Drawing on the work of others, Cohen et al. (2000) discuss the emergence of a typology of action research which also provides a sense of clarity in understanding the 'family of action research methodologies' (Dick 1999). A simplified model of the typology from Cohen et al. is given in Table 5.

Table 5: Typology of Action Research

	Key characteristics
Technical	Seek efficiencies or effectiveness in existing situations
Practical	Interpretation of situations with a view to improvement
Emancipatory	Explicit social and political agenda, seeking to bring about change in society

Whilst there are shared characteristics, it is apparent that a spectrum of action research approaches exists and depending on the approach taken, the prominence of these characteristics alters (Kemmis 1982: Reason and Bradbury 2006a). Examples of the spectrum can be seen in contributions such as Eden and Huxham (1996) where the focus is on action but whose twelve contentions nevertheless contain essential reference to the role of research and participation. The role of the self in action research is predominant in the work of McNiff (1995), Whitehead (2004) and Marshall (2006) and provides detailed accounts of how the action research becomes a lived experience for the practitioner. The third characteristic, that of participation, is predominant (but again not at the exclusion of the other two characteristics) in Participatory Action Research (Park 2006: Reason and Bradbury 2006a) where the principal role of participants is at the forefront of the research approach. In terms of the voice of the practitioner, action research has a tradition rooted in the principle of those engaged in reflecting and improving practice for self-improvement being at the heart of this form of participative enquiry. Kemmis (1988) provides an account of how the involvement of practitioners in their own research has emerged over time between the 1940s and 1980s. He asserts that they have gone from having technical involvement – where they were co-opted by outside researchers to carry out research but had no influence over the direction of the research; through to practical involvement where outside researchers worked with practitioners; through to emancipatory action research – where there were no outside researchers, but where all participants had equal influence on research design and direction. Cohen et al. (2000) critique the notion of researcher power and conclude that action research is ‘strongly empowering and emancipatory in that it gives practitioners a ‘voice.’’ (Cohen, Manion et al. 2000: 31). The nature of the practitioner’s voice in their research is further informed by the role of praxis which Kemmis describes as

‘informed committed action’ (Kemmis 1988: 172) He continues ‘Action research, as the study of praxis, must thus be research into one’s own practice.’ (Kemmis 1988: 173)

The work presented in this portfolio is located within the ‘practical’ range of the typology in Table 5 in that it seeks to ‘look, think and act’ (Stringer 2007: 9) and use an interpretive approach to understand and shape practice in supporting the student experience. Within the seven approaches to action research presented by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) my work is most closely allied with classroom action research, or what Greenwood and Levin (2007: 171) refer to as ‘educational action research’. In this respect, Elliott’s (1982) eight characteristics of action research in school situations, later revised and condensed into a model for action research (Elliott 1991), provide an appropriate framework. The model contains five activities, although these are not intended as a linear model because they contain feedback loops within a cyclical process as discussed overleaf. The five activities are:

- identification of the situation to be changed/improved
- deeper understanding the context in which the situation is contained
- development of a plan
- deciding the action steps and how they will be monitored
- implementation of subsequent actions

Elliott’s characteristics incorporate the three action research themes - action, research and participation (as discussed earlier) but they also provide the educational action researcher with a sense of awareness and understanding of the ways in which we might wish to think about and change our practice in a way that seems achievable and lasting. Elliott’s (1991: 52) work nevertheless recognises the intricacies of action research ‘which fully acknowledges the ‘realities’ which face practitioners in all their concreteness and messy complexity.’ In so doing he is encouraging educational action researchers to avoid oversimplification of the connections between practice, theory and participation.

Of all the definitions of action research, the one that particularly resonates with my approach is that offered by Reason & Bradbury (2006b: 1) part of which is reproduced here:

‘It [action research] seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.’

I like the emphasis on 'practical solutions' and the application of those solutions to situations which result in 'flourishing of individual persons and their communities'. Action research as outlined above is demonstrated in its application throughout the projects in this portfolio and is located within the 'Practical' realm of the action research typology. The accounts of the projects in Volumes 2 & 3 demonstrate the connection between theory and practice – the *action* and *research* elements of the work. In turn the practice is influenced strongly by a *participative* approach involving both students and colleagues and results in practical interventions. In so doing, this work reflects Elliot's (1991: 53) view of 'practical wisdom' being 'not stored in the mind as sets of theoretical propositions, but as a reflectively processed repertoire of cases'.

The Action Research Cycle

Action research methodology follows a cyclical process to assess, reflect, evaluate and respond to issues. Whilst the research methods employed in action research are often drawn from interpretive research – conducting and recording interviews, or observing behaviour for example – the way in which the techniques are applied in a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting is what sets action research apart as a distinct methodological approach. Greenwood and Levin (2007: 90) provide a comparison of the application of 'conventional social research and action research' which reinforces the role of the three elements (action, research and participation) in the way that research techniques and instruments are used. Elliott (1991: 53) suggests that before educational action research takes place, it is pre-empted by a desire to bring about change, and that it is this desire which brings about engagement with educational action research. This applies to the projects presented in this portfolio as shown by the aims of each project on page 2 of Volume 2 and page 1 of Volume 3.

Elliott (1991: pp70-71) offers a revised model of Kemmis' interpretation of Lewin's 'spiral of circles' to provide a diagram of the cycle of action research. Day (1991) notes Elliott's own criticism of his revised model in that it can appear mechanistic and sequential when in practice the steps can be much less ordered. Stringer (1999: 18) uses a simplified cycle of 'look, think and act' to reinforce the simplicity of the action research cycle (illustrated in Table 6) and to encourage action researchers to use it as a routine, or a way of being and I have used this simplified cycle within the projects in this portfolio.

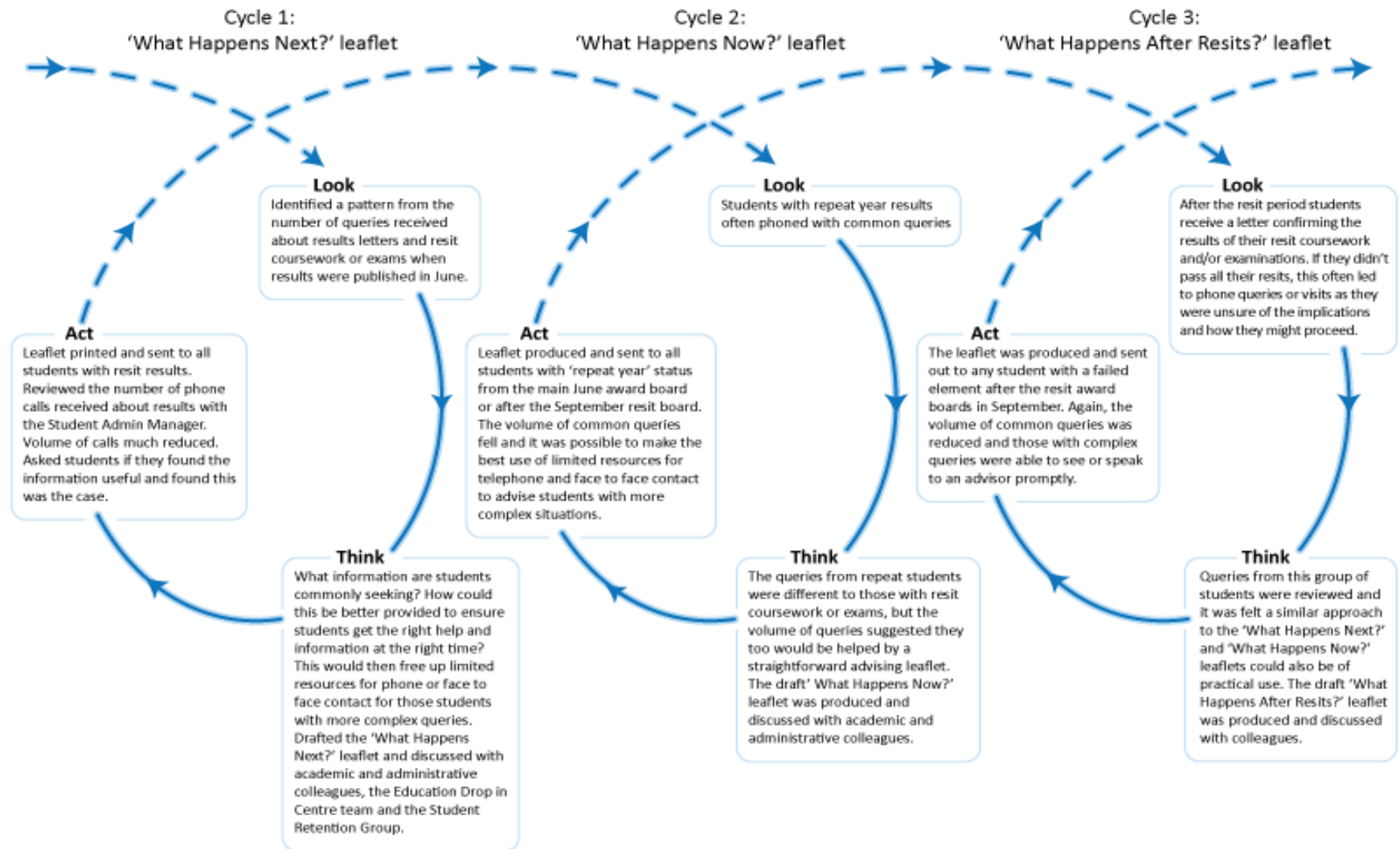
Table 6: Action Research Cycle

Stages in the action research cycle	Typical activities in the stage
Look	Gather relevant information (data) Build a picture, define and describe the situation
Think	Explore, analyse How or why are things as they are
Act	Plan, implement and evaluate (reflect)

Adapted from Stringer (2007: 9)

An illustrative example of the cycle in use in the projects comprising this portfolio is provided in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The action research cycle for the interventions 'what happens next' 'what happens now' and 'what happens after resits' (components of practice No 33, 34 & 35)



It can be seen from Figure 3 that the action research cycle has been effectively applied to the interventions in question. It would be equally possible to illustrate each of the many elements of practice and research outputs that comprise this portfolio in such a way as to show their relationship to one another and to the ongoing cycle of looking, thinking and acting in praxis (see Volumes 2 & 3 for details). However, it would be misleading to suggest that such a cycle is always straightforward. It is sometimes the case that one starts from a different point in the cycle, having jumped there from quite another direction. It is also the case that reflecting on practice can send you backwards through the cycle before moving forward again as situations change and develop. I have learnt not to be frightened of such events, but to embrace them as part of my own practice, although at the time they can seem unendingly daunting, frustrating and somewhat draining.

The sense of connection between the methodology, the projects and research evidence demonstrates the strength of the methodology as applied to the projects in this portfolio. The remaining parts of this methodological account outline the data collection methods and the approach taken to ensure the reliability of the research.

Nature of participation and role of subjects

Given the primary place of students in my work, I would like to focus on the way in which action research views participants in research to illustrate how this differs when compared to other research methodologies. There is an understanding in action research that participants are active in the research itself. This has drawn many educational researchers towards such an open and responsive method of planning, researching and evaluating their practice across a range of fields including adult education, inclusive practice, school curriculum and educational leadership. However, the openness that some educational researchers value also draws criticism from those that are concerned at the perceived loss of neutrality in the researcher/participant relationship. Kemmis (1988: 173) suggests that such criticism is ‘...an illusion created by the image of a value-free, ‘objective’ social science which cannot by definition be a science of human praxis which must always embody values and interests’.

The extent of involvement that participants have in action research is varied – there is no one single way of working with participants that all action research projects share. Some projects involve only one or two participants, but these are not viewed as lesser than a

project where several communities working together for one aim come together using action research to investigate and resolve an issue. However, what is understood amongst action researchers is an absolute acceptance that participants are viewed as exactly that – participants in the process or as Rowan quoted in Reason & Bradbury (2006a), so eloquently observed

‘If we want to know more about people, we have to encourage them to be who they are, and to resist all attempts to make them – or ourselves – into something we are not, but which is more easily observable, or countable, or manipulable.’ (Reason and Bradbury 2006a: xxx)

This quote strikes a very particular note with me – it accords with both my world view and epistemology, that to produce valuable research into practice, one should value the views of those who have experienced that practice and who can therefore, through their personal accounts of those experiences, help to shape the future experiences of others. It is interesting to consider the question of whether the interventions are put in place to change students or whether the interventions are there to give students the opportunity to review themselves for themselves and empower them with the decision to choose to change (or not). This requires a consideration of the interventions which are concerned with process compared to those which are designed to heighten students’ awareness of themselves. Some of the interventions concerned with process such as the *What Happens...* leaflet series¹¹ or the changes to the Faculty mitigating circumstances procedure¹² provide straightforward improvements to process based on students’ experiences of that process. Other interventions such as attendance monitoring, or the learner support tools, use student experiences to inform the development of the interventions presented in Volume 3, but the choice of whether students use those interventions to bring about changes in their personal study patterns is left to them to decide. This is also the case in direct advisory appointments where the approach is informed by person centred counselling practices (Colledge 2002: McLeod 2003: Cameron 2008) where the advisor facilitates the client’s discovery of their own resolution to, or acceptance of, experiences causing them personal difficulties¹³.

¹¹ A summary of the What Happens leaflet series is provided on page 14 of Volume 2 and the leaflets are contained in Volume 2 Part 2 items 37-39.

¹² Summary of the changes to the mitigating circumstances procedure can be found on page 11 of Volume 2 and in full in Volume 2 Part 2 item 34.

¹³ See Table 2 in Volume 2 page 4

Elliott (1991: 56) suggests that by embracing collaborative reflection, the educational action researcher 'takes the experiences and perceptions of clients (pupils, parents, employers) into account in the process.' In the context of this portfolio, examples of the different participatory groups have included, for example, students (in many of the interventions) parents (in the Parent to Parent intervention) academic colleagues (in attendance monitoring work as well specific interventions such as 'Realities of Degree Study') administrative colleagues (in the 'What Happens...' leaflets) professional colleagues such as counsellors (in Self Development: Moving Forward) and specialists such as those involved in the attendance monitoring and learner support tools development.

There are, however, tensions present in the participatory elements of the projects which demonstrate Elliott's messy complexity (page 29) and these can be illustrated by considering the role of students in my work. The interventions described all have the student voice in them and the students offered that voice willingly as part of the process improving the student experience¹⁴. However, it was not always the case that the same students participated in each of the development stages. For example, the group of students who led me to thinking about the development of Pathway to Graduation¹⁵ had moved on in their studies by the time I drew all the materials together and offered the programme. The group of students who subsequently took the programme all gave their feedback and this helped me re-shape some of the tasks for future groups. In other examples, I think I could and should have involved the students more directly in development of the interventions themselves and not only at the start of the process by giving their experiences. For example, using a broader group of students to review the questions and feedback in the learner support tools would have provided an added dimension to those interventions. To give the suggestion that participation by students was always straightforward would be misleading. That said I am comfortable that the student voice can be heard throughout this work, although perhaps there are some moments when it is quieter than I would like. Having acknowledged this tension, it is important also to say that it is the students' accounts of their own experiences that have shaped my practice. By listening to student issues, and building a picture of their concerns from their personal experience, it has been possible to put in place both interventions and mechanisms of support using technology. By applying an action

¹⁴ An account of the methods of ensuring informed consent can be found on page 43

¹⁵ A summary of the Pathway to Graduation can be found on page 11 of Volume 2 and the materials in Volume 2 Part 2 item 33.

research methodology, the interventions are shown to be a direct response to student experiences. In this way, the University is adapting its culture to meet the needs of its students, rather than requiring them to assimilate the institutional culture as explored in the literature on student retention earlier. A similar approach has been used successfully in other studies, for example Thomas (2006a) and Young, Glogowska and Lockyer (2007). The action research approach helps avoid didactic decisions based on what is believed to be an issue of concern in the student experience but which comes from the perspective of the lecturer's or administrator's experience. Reason and Bradbury (2006b: 4) assert that such foundations are 'not simply questions of methodology...we can argue that they lead to 'better' research because the practical and theoretical outcomes of the research process are grounded in the perspective and interests of those immediately concerned, and not filtered through an outside researcher's preconceptions and interests.'

Methods of data collection

The methods of data collection used in the projects are discussed in detail in Volumes 2 and 3, but are briefly described here. The main method of data collection used with students was the collection of narrative through semi-structured interviews using the framework described in Volume 2 (page 3). As discussed in Volumes 2 and 3, these interviews were not primarily for the purpose of research. They were advisory interviews carried out in response to students seeking help and support. As such, the data drawn from them was collected through thematic analysis of the documentary records taken at the time the interviews were conducted. The total number of interviews from both projects is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Number of student interviews

Academic Year	Number of interviews	Number of students
2001-02	267	89
2002-03	819	368
2003-04	1310	380
2004-05	1176	390
2005-06	1061	442
2006-07	701	312
2007-08	897	441
2008-09	727	360
TOTALS	6958	2782

Questionnaires to students who had taken part in attendance monitoring project, resulted in 455 responses received over three years, as discussed in Volume 3. The online learner support tools described in Volume 3 also provided useful data on the student experience and the numbers participating in these exercises are shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Access and completion of learner support tools

	07-08		08-09		09-10		Total
	Early Days	Study Health Check	Early Days	Study Health Check	Early Days	Study Health Check	
Number who accessed the tools	737	431	398	558	969	915	4008
Students who partially completed	648 (88%)	327 (76%)	324 (81%)	366 (66%)	633 (65%)	547 (60%)	2845
Students who answered every question	89 (12%)	104 (24%)	74 (18%)	192 (34%)	336 (35%)	368 (40%)	1163

Reflective and reflexive conversations with university staff including academic, administrative and specialists led to the development and shaping of the interventions described in Volumes 2 and 3 and an online questionnaire with these groups provided 251 responses offering views on the Advice Shop provision as discussed in Volume 2. Questionnaires were also used in the 'Parent to Parent' intervention described in Volume 2 which resulted in 37 responses.

Data for both projects was also drawn from the literature and from existing sources including University withdrawal, suspension of study and transfer forms¹⁶, mitigating circumstances forms¹⁷ and results from examination boards¹⁸. For Project 2, existing data also included feedback from external examiners in examination boards, and information from the module database¹⁹.

¹⁶ Used to inform interventions such as Realities of Degree Study, 'What Happens' leaflet series described in Volume 2

¹⁷ Informed the process changes to the mitigating circumstances procedure described in Volume 2

¹⁸ Used to inform the creation of Self Development: Moving Forward intervention described in Volume 2

¹⁹ Both External Examiner feedback and the data from the module database informed the student attendance monitoring project described in Volume 3

The records of student interviews were used to draw common themes from the students' descriptions of their experiences, divulged as part of their advisory interview or when discussing withdrawal from their course of study. This was achieved by undertaking documentary analysis using a thematic approach (Gomm 2004: Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify the patterns in the experiences contained in client records (see Volume 2) and on the spreadsheet used to capture information about timing and reason for withdrawal. Whilst the notes of the advisory interviews were taken by the advisor, each student signed their record sheet and agreed or amended the notes taken. As the interviews were advisory in their nature, the notes were not taken to fit into a specific coding framework and the subsequent data analysis used an inductive approach which Braun and Clarke (2006: 83) recognise as being free of the researcher's analytic preconceptions. In the case of withdrawal interviews, a wide-ranging discussion resulted in the student expressing their thoughts about the reasons for withdrawing and the experiences (both within and outside of the University) that led to this decision.

Analysis of the patterns or themes from the documentary evidence of these interviews was achieved by thematically analysing experiences of clients in four ways:

- by Award to determine whether similar issues were repeatedly identified (this led to interventions which supported groups of students studying particular awards such as Realities of Degree Study and the attendance interventions with Law and History students described in Volume 2)
- by level (year) of study
- by date to determine whether issues were appearing at certain times of the year. The 'What Happens....' leaflet series was directly influenced by the timing of queries arising after results were published.
- By individual student – these individual experiences often led to interventions from which groups of students had an improved experience – see Volume 2 'individualised interventions' for examples of these. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, the frequency of an experience occurring was not a primary reason for designing and developing an intervention as one student's experience may have resulted in an intervention that benefitted many students.

These categories were then used to determine whether an intervention would be effective in improving the student experience for others as described in Volume 2 (see page 8).

Research rigour

The place of research rigour, validity and reliability in action research methodologies has been discussed in the literature. Bradbury and Reason (2006: 343) draw on views expressed by others (Lyotard 1979, Kvale 1989 and Wolcott 1990) and question whether such criterion-based evaluation of research has a place in action research. Borda (2006) calls instead for a multiplicity of validities, whilst Kemmis (2006) and Eden and Huxham (1996) suggest that because action research expresses the views and truths of the participants, this can only result in valid outcomes. In the first of his biennial reviews of action research literature, Dick (2004: 437) noted 'a welcome emphasis on quality and rigour, perhaps in reaction to the sloppy research labelled action research in the past.'

In viewing validity and rigour through an action research lens, Greenwood and Levin (2005) suggest that the extent to which validity, credibility and reliability are ensured relates to how the stakeholders put the outcomes of the action research into practice. Stringer (2007: 57) suggests that rigour when applied to action research is concerned with 'trustworthiness' and offers a set of checks based on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) being credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Bradbury and Reason (2006) encourage action researchers to demonstrate validity and reliability by considering whether the methods they have chosen are applied appropriately to their research and also that the reasons for those choices, and how they affected the research, are made expressly clear. Although these examples show differing visions of rigour, validity and reliability, they all demonstrate a determination to consider an alternative exploration of rigour when viewed through an action research lens.

In considering the role of research reflexivity Gomm (2004: 240) suggests that 'researchers adopt a third-party viewpoint on their own research activities...' and in so doing I would like to express my reflexivity concerning my multiple roles associated with the projects – researcher, advisor, academic and manager. In carrying out these roles my focus was always on the student experience and how the understanding gained from my work advising students, could in turn influence my work as an academic who researched the areas of student experience and student retention. The provision of the Advice Shop service required that I also fulfilled the role of manager and I did so by maintaining the focus on the student experience of our service. This meant regularly reviewing how our service operated, including physical space, opening hours and, our online presence and so on. However, as a

manager I was also very aware of the potential for members of my team to experience stress as a result of dealing with the volume of queries from students as well as the sometimes upsetting details that students necessarily shared with us in order to receive appropriate help and support. Details of the staff development provided for the team is given in Volume 2 (page 24).

Social power and truth

It is important to acknowledge the role of social power in the relationship between the advisor and the students. Whilst the students were not always aware in advance of an appointment that the advisor is a member of academic staff, this was made clear at the first interview. As the advisor was not teaching any of the students directly this was not seen as a difficulty by either party. In fact, many students stated that it was helpful to discuss their academic concerns and opportunities with an advisor who could relate not just to their situation but who could also provide them with a useful context through which to examine their issues. By acknowledging this possible social power and being open about the research, it was felt that students would be comfortable about giving accounts of their experiences. Sikes (2000: 2004) provides a powerful description of the role of social power and its link with truth in interviews and this presents a challenge for me in the sense that there are multiple layers to the relationship between the advisor and student. As co-participants in action research, the students' accounts of their experiences cannot be interpreted by another as truthful or untruthful as this would conflict with the action research approach. However, acknowledging the potential influence of social power in the advisor/student relationship permits the possibility of clients telling untruths for a range of reasons, not least self-protection and this uncovers the complexities involved in this multi-layered relationship. One way of acknowledging such complexity is to take an action research approach to the triangulation of student narratives and this is discussed in the next part of this account.

Triangulation in Narrative Accounts

The role of triangulation in research is often used to assure the researcher that their interpretation of events is accurate, but this is not the case in action research where participants' accounts are not interpreted but used to shape future action. The role of narrative in action research is seen as fundamental by Greenwood & Levin (2007) and they

argue that single stories have a significant role in challenging and changing established theories because the knowledge such cases generate is rooted in practice. As discussed earlier the role of participants and their experiences is central to the projects in this portfolio and having acknowledged the tension introduced in the multi-layered relationship between advisors and clients, and the possible impact of this, it was necessary to ensure the reliability of the interventions by introducing triangulation of the student accounts and experiences.

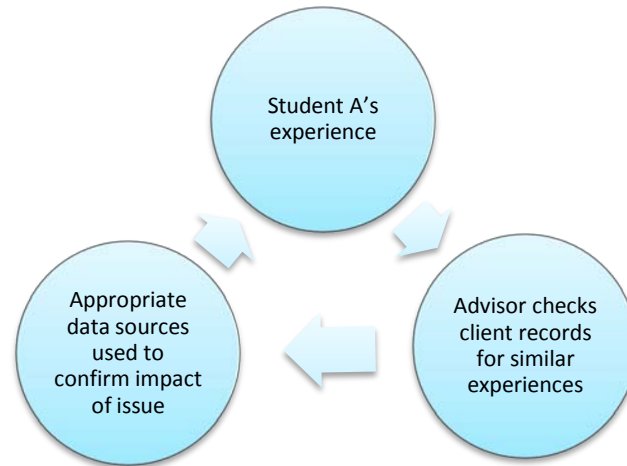
The importance of triangulation is reinforced by Tooley and Darby (1998) in their critique of published educational research. They set out a number of research questions designed to encourage greater reliability and validity, and in so doing include one concerning the importance of triangulation. However, this provides the action researcher with a dilemma. How can one student's narrative of their experience be triangulated with another's when that story is, by its very nature, unique? Elliott (2005) points to the fact that whilst the narrative account may not be the most reliable way of gathering information about when an event occurred (which she notes can be easily verified from other sources), it is a very reliable method of gaining views on what it was like to be at that event, or experience the impact of the event. In this way, whilst the student narratives may not be triangulated closely, the themes about which they reflect, or experiences they talk about, are often similar and accordingly can be reliably reinforced by one another when the advisor compares the impact of their experiences on their learning. It is important that the triangulation is provided from students' own experiences or evidence of the impact of those experiences rather than being confirmed or denied by staff perceptions of student experiences because were it otherwise this would deny both the nature of the participation in action research and the naturalistic research framework.

The inclusion of triangulation in an action research methodology is accepted practice (Elliott 1991: Stringer 2007) and when used in the projects comprising this portfolio, is viewed through a qualitative research lens. Denzin (1997: 319) discusses the variety of methods of triangulation applied to qualitative research. Elliott (1991: 82) makes the point that, in action research

'Triangulation....is not so much a technique for monitoring, as a more general method for bringing different kinds of evidence into some relationship with each other so that they can be compared and contrasted.'

To ensure that student accounts of their experiences resulted in reliable and valid interventions, triangulation was implemented as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Triangulation process for narrative accounts



By triangulating the student narratives of their experiences with other data sources, the reliability of the interventions becomes strengthened as they are based on multiple sources, an approach which Stringer (2007) sees as linking to credibility of the action research²⁰. Triangulation of the accounts also ensured the reliability of my interpretations of those accounts, adding further strength to the interventions developed as a result of the students' experiences.

In an interesting aside Richardson and St Pierre (2005) talk about alternative imagery, suggesting that rather than the triangle, a crystal could be more appropriate. They feel the crystal, being many sided and in continuous growth, reflects the changing nature of qualitative inquiry when compared with the fixed nature of the triangle. Another aspect of triangulation for the action researcher is offered by Eden & Huxham (1996). In three of their contentions for standards in action research, they argue that triangulation in action research comes from the observation of events, accounts of participants and changes in those accounts over time. This view accords with the practice articulated in this portfolio as the introduction of the interventions described in Projects 1 and 2 each led to changing experiences over time as shown in Volume 2 page 34 and Volume 3 page 29.

²⁰ For a description of the client record sheets and how these were used to design and implement the interventions see pages 6 - 9 of Volume 2 Part 1.

Overview of Ethical Considerations

Students and their experiences are at the centre of the projects comprising this portfolio and that raises a number of ethical considerations. The projects are there to provide help, support, and advice and to stimulate achievement. If any student was disadvantaged, demotivated or distressed as a result of seeking help or being offered support, the projects themselves would have failed. There are a number of safe-guards in place to ensure that such situations do not arise and these, together with the ethical concerns within the research framework, are outlined in the next part of this account.

Ethics in helping and advising

Within the professions of counselling, advising and helping there is an acknowledgement that working within an ethical framework is essential for the protection of both clients and advisors (Buck, Moore et al. 2001; McLeod 2003; Lowenstein 2008). A number of professional associations have developed ethical frameworks including the National Association for Academic Advising (NACADA), the British Association for Counselling, and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. These reflect the central ethical ideals of (a) aiming to bring well-being to those you assist; (b) minimising harm as far as possible; (c) providing an equitable and fair experience; (d) respecting the autonomy of the individual; and (e) remaining committed to carrying out the actions you say you will (Lowenstein 2008). The application of these ideals to the projects within this portfolio has been assured by the training and development of advisors, and the desire to do the best for all the students we work with. The University's ethics committee has approved the various projects and they have also been checked for compliance with the Data Protection Act. The ethical framework for Project 1 is discussed on page 9 of Volume 2. Ethical considerations relating to Project 2 are covered on pages 4 and 19 of Volume 3.

Informed consent

Students were primarily visiting the Advice Shop for support or guidance for themselves, and the majority would not have considered how their experience could ultimately lead to improving the student experiences of others. To ensure that they understood the nature of their participation, a framework of informed consent was employed (Anderson 1998; Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Gomm 2004; Opie 2004; Elliott 2005; Jupp 2006). This ensured they were

fully aware of the ways in which their anonymised experiences might be included in the design of interventions to help others as well as receiving individual support.

Based on accepted good practice, the following principles have been applied:

- Each client of the Advice Shop is made aware of how student experiences are drawn on to inform interventions which are designed to improve the experience
- The extent of the confidentiality code²¹ is displayed and discussed
- Clients are provided with an opportunity to withdraw consent at any time meaning their individual (anonymised) experience would not be included
- There is a clear undertaking that whether consent is given or declined the student's query will receive the same attention and that clients will be supported in the resolution of their query.

By applying a clear framework for informed consent, students were able to decide for themselves whether their experiences would be drawn upon to influence the interventions that may follow. By giving informed consent, the students were agreeing to become participants in the various projects. Whilst for some the only involvement they had was the telling and sharing of their story or experience, many would have been able to recognise their voice in the subsequent initiatives and interventions. In this way, the nature of participation in action research is maintained, but the students were able to receive support and guidance in an individualised service. This in turn may have ultimately led to improvements for many students.

The research approach described in this overview sets out the methodology and methods of data collection together with the approach taken with participants including the nature of informed consent and the use of narrative. Reflecting on whether these represent the best fit of techniques to answer the central question of the effectiveness of faculty-based student support I believe that they are. They offer a collective and coherent framework within which to understand and listen to the learning support needs of students. The work presented in this portfolio represents my attempts at practical wisdom in a setting of practitioner research. Seeking to understand and improve my own practice has, in turn, involved the participation of others in a simple action research cycle of looking, thinking and acting. The

²¹ The confidentiality code and notes for advisors are contained in Volume 2 Part 2 item 30

next part of this overview considers the effectiveness of a faculty-based approach to student support. Readers are advised to turn to Volumes 2 and 3 for a full account of the projects before returning to this Volume.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the effectiveness of faculty-based student support and the volumes comprising this portfolio have set out an appropriate picture from the literature, together with an articulation of the research methodology and methods, reflections on both projects and the tangible research and practice outputs associated with them. This part of the overview will attempt to reach an overarching conclusion about the effectiveness of faculty-based student support based on the evidence presented in this portfolio.

The review of literature presented earlier in this overview established that student learning support is one aspect of an institutional approach to student retention (see pages 14-22). Whilst student support alone isn't the solution to retention issues, the evidence presented in this thesis demonstrates that it can make a contribution to improving retention in terms of institutional policy and student achievement, progression and wellbeing. It was also acknowledged in the literature that there is relatively little written about how institutions or practitioners can evaluate the effectiveness of student retention initiatives (page 19). Anderson (1998) suggests a simple definition of effectiveness is the extent to which project objectives have been achieved and Volume 2 (page 30-35) and Volume 3 (page 28-29) outline the ways in which the two projects met their respective aims. In order to reach a conclusion about the effectiveness of faculty based student support, and taking account of the two perspectives discussed in the research aim, the two projects will now be considered in conjunction with one another by addressing the following questions:

1. Did the two projects reach their intended audiences?
2. Were there positive outcomes for both students and the institution as a result of these initiatives?
3. What were the challenges associated with the projects?

In considering question 1, it can be seen from Volume 2 (page 31) and Volume 3 (page 25) that the projects did reach their intended audiences. The Advice Shop saw rapidly increasing usage from 728 enquiries and interviews in the first year of operation to 3327²² in the final year under my leadership and it is apparent from the student feedback (discussed in Volume 2) that students knew of and were satisfied with the services provided. The audiences for the interventions in Project 2 were more specifically targeted and again it can be seen that both interventions were successful in reaching those respective groups of students (see page 11 and 23 of Volume 3 for details). All the interventions were accessible to students through self-referral (apart from the electronic attendance monitoring intervention) and the volume of students accessing the Advice Shop directly is further evidence of the effectiveness of the provision in reaching its intended audience. It was not uncommon to have students from other Faculties calling in for guidance and support before the service was rolled out across the University – another indicator of the value of the service from the student perspective.

A consideration of the positive outcomes for students from the projects (question 2) is also suggested by the high level of satisfaction expressed²³ indicating that students found the support they received useful in helping them address issues that they were finding difficult. A further positive impact of the interventions was the change in student behaviour which led to improved retention and performance. If we return to the three points made by Eden and Huxham (1996) regarding triangulation (page 42), a further measure of whether the projects can be judged to have been effective is offered by ‘...changes in... accounts and interpretation of events *as time passes*. This is because the triangulation measure of action research relates expressly to the way in which practice has impacted on experience. It has become apparent that the interventions did result in changes in student experiences over time. This is illustrated by the way students responded to the *Realities of Degree Study* intervention²⁴ and the improvement in the number of students submitting coursework of pass standard under mitigating circumstances²⁵. These changes demonstrate the effectiveness of faculty-based student support because they were implemented as a direct result of students’ experiences. Students were also positive about the support they received when seeking to re-engage with their studies after poor attendance, and student feedback

²² See the section Analysis of Clients Using the Advice Shop in each of the annual Advice Shop Reports in evidence items 17-24

²³ see page 31 of Volume 2 and pages 25-26 of Volume 3

²⁴ Discussed on page 13 of Volume 2

²⁵ Discussed on page 13 of Volume 2

suggests many improved their attendance as a result of this intervention. Whilst a proportion of students continued to withdraw, the advisory process helped them make a positive decision about future directions rather than a drift away from their studies or think of themselves as failing (Peelo 1994). Given that Quinn et al. (2005) found that large numbers of withdrawing students planned to return to higher education at a future point, enabling students to feel a sense of control and positivity about their decisions is considered to be important as it may help to reduce feelings of failure, and ultimately contribute to their future return to higher education.

Taking an institutional perspective to question 2, the projects have several positive outcomes. The systematic and accurate collection of reasons and timing of student withdrawal contributed significantly to institutional understanding of the key student withdrawal issues for the University. This led directly to a clearer understanding of the number of students withdrawing within the academic year of study and those leaving between years. In turn this enabled the University to consider the distinct learning, teaching and support needs of students who withdrew from their studies within the academic year against the needs of students who failed to progress between years and who withdrew as a result of their non-progression. The Advice Shop project in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences contributed to a reduction in the student in-year withdrawal²⁶ rate from a starting point of 6% in the academic year 2000-2001 to a rate of 4% in 2008-09. As can be seen from the annual Advice Shop Reports, this also contributed to significant revenue savings for the Faculty.

The improved understanding of student support needs generated by the Advice Shop project led to three policy changes within the University – the decision to provide faculty-based support for all faculties²⁷, a change in the way the University approaches personal tutoring support²⁸ and the decision to create a ‘fitness to study’ policy to support students who have difficulty continuing with their studies²⁹. Policy changes were accompanied by changes in administrative procedures such as enhancements to the forms and procedures used for notification of withdrawal or suspension of study to ensure accurate information

²⁶ See the annual Advice Shop Operation reports in Volume 2 Part 2 items 17-24

²⁷ The roll-out of the Advice Shops is discussed on pages 23-25 of Volume 2

²⁸ The policy paper ‘Student Personal Support’ is presented in Volume 2 Part 2 item 27

²⁹ See page 10 of the Faculty Advice Shop Review of Operation 2007-08 report in Volume 2 Part 2 item 26.

was captured. A protocol to follow up all pre-registered students if they had not re-enrolled within the first three weeks of the new academic year was also established³⁰.

Considering question 3, the major challenge associated with the projects is that they took place in a complex and changing environment. Student cohorts changed every year and the volume of students, the mix of educational backgrounds and prior experiences was fluid, requiring advisory and support services to adapt depending on the needs of heterogeneous groups. The institutional changes taking place over the course of the projects included a change in organisational structure from Schools to Faculties, the introduction of course fees, and a desire to increase research generated income. These challenges required the projects to be responsive and adaptive and examples of such responsiveness can be seen in the way the Advice Shop project was rolled out across the University under my leadership (see page 23 Volume 2). This included the balance achieved between a common baseline provision as well as the flexibility to provide faculty-specific support. A second example of responsiveness was in the way technology was introduced to provide an alternative delivery mechanism as demonstrated in Project 2.

Overall the conclusion of the effectiveness of faculty-based student support is that it represents an effective use of limited resources to bring about change from both student and institutional perspectives and to improve the delivery of advisory services to all university students. Yorke (1999: 112) suggests 'In the first instance it is up to the student to cope with the demands of the programme...However, it is also up to institutions to look at ways in which the learning experience can be enhanced..'. It is proposed that the projects in this portfolio have sought to use the student voice to achieve a better experience for students which in turn has provided the institution with opportunities to respond with an enhanced learning experience. In a dynamic and changing environment however I recognise that these interventions are in a sense provisional. To continue to be effective, faculty-based student support should be continually evolving. The final section of this overview presents a new framework to enable advisors to review the organisation, delivery and typology of advising in a changing and dynamic environment.

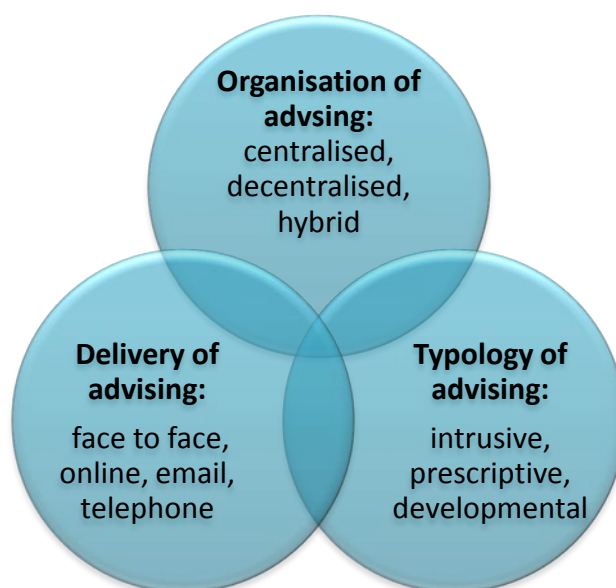
³⁰ See page 11 of the Faculty Advice Shop Review of Operation 2006-07 report in Volume 2 Part 2 item 25.

Contribution to Knowledge

The literature on student learning support and the three elements of organisation, delivery and type of advising have each been considered in the literature and discussed in this portfolio. As part of my reflections concerning the practice outlined in these volumes, a picture has emerged of the way in which my practice connects the three elements, thus providing a new framework through which student learning support can be established, developed and reviewed.

As discussed earlier in this portfolio the typology, method of delivery and organisational model each consist of multiple parts. Organisational models can be centralised, decentralised or hybrid. The typology of advising moves along the continuum from intrusive, through prescriptive to developmental advising. The delivery methods include face to face, online, telephone, email and so on. As shown in the review of literature discussed earlier there is evidence that these three aspects (typology, organisation and delivery) have been considered and viewed as separate aspects of advising. My emerging model brings them together and suggests a blended approach to student learning support as an effective framework through which to view practice.

Figure 5: A Blended Approach to the Organisation, Delivery and Typology of Advising



By considering each of the three aspects (organisation, delivery and type of advising) together, it is possible to develop, establish and review interventions to support particular groups or audiences via an appropriate delivery mechanism within the chosen organisational model. Viewing provision as a blend of the three elements also provides a vehicle for reflecting on current learning support provision. For example individual advisors wishing to review their own practice or groups of advisors reflecting on the provision for a faculty or department, or indeed senior managers reviewing the provision of student learning support throughout an institution could all use the framework.

The approach encourages reflection on whether there is an apparent over-reliance on one delivery method or one type of advising, or if there is a balanced set of delivery methods and advising types in use. The strength of the blended approach to the three elements of student learning support is that the focus is on the output from the provision, and it therefore provides a holistic view of student learning support. This has a distinct advantage over a piecemeal approach which separates the organisation of the provision from the type of advising and chosen delivery methods as this may encourage an inward-looking institutional perspective rather than a focus on output.

Addressing student learning support holistically also enables advisors to identify potential gaps in advice provision. For example do the interventions rely on students making an overt request for help (a reactive service) or does silence invoke support (a pro-active service) or is there a balance of reactive and proactive interventions appropriate for the needs of all students within an institution. Employing a blended approach enables advisors to reach a wide variety of students who have different support needs, for example, intrusive methods such as attendance monitoring help to reach those who may not seek support directly. Choosing alternative delivery methods, for example online support, for these groups is also effective as the learner support tools, Early Days and the Study Health Check, have shown. An illustration of the blended approach in my own practice within a hybrid organisational approach³¹ is provided in Table 9.

³¹ As described in Volume 2, page 29

Table 9: Illustration of the blended approach to advising type and delivery method in practice

Element of practice	Advising type			Delivery method			
	Intrusive	Prescriptive	Developmental	Telephone	Face to face	Online	E-mail
Advice Shop drop-in		*	*	*	*		*
Pathway to Graduation			*		*		
Procedural changes to mitigating circumstances		*	*	*	*		*
Realities of degree study			*		*		
Parent to Parent	*		*			*	
What Happens leaflets	*	*	*			*	
Self development: Moving Forward	*		*		*		
Webs of support			*			*	
Individualised interventions	*	*	*	*	*		*
Attendance monitoring	*		*	*	*		*
Early Days & Study Health Check	*	*	*			*	

Table 9 demonstrates the consideration of a blended approach to student learning support by showing the balance between the typology of advising and delivery method in my practice. As can be seen, the majority of interventions all have an aspect of developmental advice connected with them, and the methods of delivering advice show an equal balance between telephone, email and online methods, with face to face being the most common. This blend has been shown to meet the particular needs of the students at the University of Glamorgan in the effectiveness section of this overview, but by using the grid shown in Table 9, any advisor could review the balance of their advisory services and determine whether that balance meets the needs of their student groups. In this way, the blended model shows the strength of considering the three elements of student learning support together, but offers institutions the flexibility of establishing such support in a way that recognises the contingent needs of individual institutions, faculties and departments. Complexity can be addressed by developing multiple frameworks to take account of specific advising needs of distinct groups of students. For example, a University which comprises several colleges, or which includes provision for 14-19 year olds, may choose to review distinct parts of the institution using a separate grid and then compile an overarching review by bringing the grids together in a composite.

Through the projects outlined in this portfolio I have made a contribution to knowledge by investigating the ways in which the provision of student support for learning can be shaped. My contribution to theory and methods can be seen in the research outputs. Project 1 demonstrates my contribution to the literature in seeking to understand more about student experiences by careful attention to the discourse from participants (Fitzgibbon and Prior 2003: Fitzgibbon and Prior 2007: Fitzgibbon 2009b: Fitzgibbon 2009a: Fitzgibbon and Harrett 2009: Fitzgibbon 2010) and in the organisation of faculty-based student support (Fitzgibbon and Carter 2006: Fitzgibbon, Stocking et al. 2007: Fitzgibbon, Stocking et al. 2009). The research outputs linked to project two illustrate my contribution to the nature of online skill development (Jones and Fitzgibbon 2002: Fitzgibbon and Prior 2008: Jones, Blackey et al. 2010) and in the shaping of supportive attendance monitoring practice (Fitzgibbon and Prior 2004: Newman-Ford, Fitzgibbon et al. 2008) together with observations about the changing nature of the student social experience in higher education linked to the world of online socialisation (Fitzgibbon 2008: Fitzgibbon and Prior 2010). These outputs have contributed to an understanding of the student experience and the ways in which institutions can adapt to meet the learning support needs of their students which in

turn has led to the emergence of a new blended approach to the organisation, delivery and typology of advising.

My contribution to practice can be seen from the range of interventions in the projects and these have been shared widely amongst the academic community and been found to offer practical approaches which are transferable to other higher education institutions. The emerging model of blended advising offers a practical resource to student learning support advisors and can enable the effective development, implementation and review of learner support across higher education, but with the flexibility to recognise individual institutional composition or characteristics.

Reflecting critically on what has been learned throughout the time of the projects, several points emerge. Firstly, the role of key stakeholders is significant in the establishment and continuation of projects such as those presented here. When the Advice Shop was established it had the backing of the Head of School and support from the PVC (Academic) who instigated the roll out across the University. However, a change of senior staff with different views of the role of student support in higher education, and my own change of career path has meant a change of direction for the projects, perhaps an inevitable consequence of change in large institutions.

Secondly, the resources which enable such projects to flourish are critical. Several of the interventions had been shown to be effective (Pathway to Graduation and Self Development are two examples) but had to be withdrawn because of their resource-intensive nature. Technology may yet play a part in seeing a revised Pathway to Graduation programme but it is clear that the human, technological and financial resources linked to projects such as these will play a large part in their ongoing success or failure.

In a dynamic and changing environment these projects and their conclusions are in a sense temporal as discussed on page 45. Whilst the importance of the student voice in future development of student learning support has been acknowledged throughout this thesis, the method of capturing that voice presents some challenges as outlined earlier in this overview (see pages 33-36) and suggest some of Elliott's (1991) messy complexity particularly with regard to social power and truth as discussed on page 40 .

Feedback on action is an important part of action research and there were challenges associated with feeding back to participants who had sometimes moved on by the time interventions were developed (as discussed on page 35). Feeding back to staff who had participated was more straightforward and was achieved through sharing developments and practice in staff seminars. During the course of the projects there were six university-wide staff seminars and numerous feedback meetings through attendance at scheme, award, departmental and divisional meetings. New academic staff were introduced to the pastoral and academic support functions at their induction and I also contributed to the seminar programme for academic staff taking the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching. It was challenging to maintain the student provision, develop new interventions and maintain and review existing ones as well as feedback to participant groups and at times I'm sure I could have done more in each of those areas, but overall I believe a good balance was achieved between new development, review and maintenance, and feedback.

The final aspect of critical reflection is to take learning forward and through the process of reviewing these projects and my own practice in preparing this portfolio, several new research directions have begun to crystallise for future development. The first is to seek to contribute to the sparse literature on the use of learning technologies and their adaptation for use in learner support, beginning perhaps with the way in which QMP has been adapted to provide clear guidance and support. A further investigation of other learning technologies such as adapting e-portfolios for use in advisory services may prove very informative. The second area of research is to explore the tension between *at risk groups* expressed in the literature and my observation of *risk moments or episodes*. I am at the beginning of being able to articulate this tension, but believe that a better understanding of why some students are unable to overcome difficulties whilst others find a way through them is an important area to explore further. This may also lead to the need for different frameworks of student support for different times of the academic year, a phasing of delivery methods and types of advising depending on when risk episodes occur. Finally, I would like to respond to the need for more literature concerning ways in which we might evaluate the effectiveness of student learner support interventions by joining with other practitioners to share approaches to evaluation of effectiveness in learner support. In recognising these future research areas, I am also mindful of my growth as a researcher and expert through this learning journey. The portfolio route has presented the opportunity to take a more reflexive approach to the multiple roles of academic, advice shop manager and

researcher and the challenges associated with this are discussed throughout this work. I also recognise that my understanding of the research process has grown exponentially throughout the period of my Doctoral studies and through this understanding my future research will continue to make a contribution to the nature of student learning support in higher education.

In conclusion, the projects comprising this portfolio have demonstrated that faculty-based student support is an effective method of supporting learners and have made a positive contribution to theory, method and practice from the dual perspectives of students and the institution. The student voice has been heard and listened to and makes a significant contribution to the design of student learning support that reaches its intended audiences in a way that makes a difference.

Throughout the period of these projects, I have come to firmly believe that when Manning, Kinzie and Schuh (2006) expressed the view that 'one size does not fit all' they were correct. However, I have also come to realise that when designing student learning support for a higher education institution, the way in which the typology of advising, the delivery of advice and the organisational model are applied will ultimately determine the effectiveness of the provision. From my practice, the University of Glamorgan has benefitted from the evolution of an advisory service that meets both the students' and institutional needs. The hybridised model I have introduced draws on the advantages of both a centralised and decentralised model and offers students a service which responds to their needs. The service has also shaped the understanding of the institutional issues associated with student retention and achievement through the collection, analysis and dissemination of countless examples of best practice in the field of student learning support as outlined in this portfolio. My expertise in this area has been recognised with the publication of journal papers and conference presentations as outlined in the evidence accompanying this volume.

The creation of a blended approach to student advising offers all higher education practitioners and institutions an opportunity to review their student learning support mechanisms and to determine the model that suits them. As the student body changes, so the views expressed by that body will change, as will the ability of higher education institutions to react to the drivers for such change. However, I believe that the framework for reviewing student learning support provided by the blended approach described in this

thesis offers a contribution to knowledge which is applicable to the higher education sector as a whole, and will provide the flexibility to enable learners and institutions to shape their futures and enhance the learning experience for all.

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