

# The Education Drop-in Centre at the University of Glamorgan

Liz Staddon and Lowri Newman

Learning Resource Centre ■ University of Glamorgan

## Abstract

*The education Drop-in Centre at the University of Glamorgan was established during the academic year 1996/97. Its aim has always been to provide generic study support for students with writing and study skills as well as mathematics and statistics skills. Since its creation the Centre has been through a variety of changes in terms of staffing and layout. It has grown steadily each year and now comprises of two sites and seventeen staff, three full-time administrators and fourteen part-time tutors. The Centre is seen to play a key part in retaining students and has become part of the fabric of the University.*

## The Execution

Members from what is now called the Centre for Lifelong Learning created the Centre during the academic year 1996/1997. It was felt that rising student numbers and modularization was making it more difficult for students to access the sources of help and advice that were available to them and that a comfortable and open space in the Learning Resource Centre (LRC) would enable them to meet and discuss study issues, access study resources and attend surgeries on designated topics.

A senior lecturer agreed to manage the Centre and a temporary assistant was appointed to set it up and deal with student enquiries. A lot of care was put into the location and ambience of the Centre, the aim being to create a space that was easily accessible, open and welcoming. The final result was a windowed construction placed in the centre of the book collection. Guidance materials were gathered on maths, IT, academic writing and general study skills such as time management and revision technique. Specialist maths support was provided by two lecturers from the University's maths division on part-time secondments. Records of users were kept from September 1997 and the Centre recorded 1140 callers in its first full year.

## Changes and Developments

Since opening, we have experimented with different Centre layouts and staffing arrangements. Early visitors expressed a wish for private, as well as open spaces. In the summer of 1999 the Centre relocated to a slightly quieter alcove in the LRC which meant that two closed areas could be created with screens. Regarding staff, the Centre requires two sorts: friendly front-deskers who can deal with diverse inquires during office hours, and tutors with broad expertise who are familiar with the University's curricula. We have combined these differently over the years, and have discovered the following:

- Front-deskers need periods of time away from the Centre because its 'drop-in' nature can be overwhelming. Job-shares work well and final year students can provide excellent cover.

- Front-deskers must be protected from long guidance sessions because they need to be on the lookout for hesitant newcomers.
- Tutors must be both highly skilled and friendly.
- Staff, most of whom are part-time, value opportunities to meet so they can share experiences and gain a sense of belonging.

## The Centre Now

The Centre has attracted more users every year, and careful record keeping has strengthened requests for extra resourcing. In September 2001 we were allocated monies from the widening access fund which meant we could open a second Centre at the University's Glyntaff site, extend opening hours to 7pm and employ extra staff. We now total 17: a manager, two highly qualified full-time administrators and 14 part-time tutors (4 of these teach maths).

## What Support Was Needed?

**Student needs:** Most students who come for maths support need basic tuition: they need clear and slow explanations and to be reassured that they are not foolish. Some students need firmer encouragement to become responsible for their own learning. Most students opt for one-to-one tuition rather than self-help resources.

**Staff needs:** Practically, maths tutors need warning if students make unusual requests for help and they need access to SPSS and paper support materials. Developmentally, they need opportunities to discuss possible improvements and approaches to one-to-one tutoring: the main challenge seems to be recognizing when students become over dependent and knowing how to deal with it. In September 2001 we began an informal staff development programme: we pay all part-timers to attend three sessions per year which includes training in one-to-one tutoring, opportunities to discuss current issues and updates on other support mechanisms at the University.

## Getting the Message Across

It took several years to establish the Centre as integral to University life. The trick seems to be inclusion in mainstream activities and information materials. The LRC includes the Centre in its induction video so that all incoming students learn about us. We also run workshops on school induction programmes because face-to-face contact seems to be so much more effective than leafleting. We believe that it is especially important to win the support of teaching staff so that they refer students to us when they spot a need. The maths division, which services all maths teaching at the University, is especially active in encouraging students to use the Centre during term time. Most Centre tutors also teach on mainstream programmes and so we can guarantee continuity and quality.

## The Challenges

- Academic schools quite naturally deal with teaching and learning matters internally and a generic study support facility can easily be seen as second best. It has taken some time to convince colleagues (and I'm sure we haven't succeeded fully) that our study skills facility is beneficial to their students. To address this, we work with subject specialists whenever possible and often employ tutors who are also part-time lecturers on mainstream courses.
- Knowing how to staff the Centre effectively and economically is challenging for two reasons. First, staff may be required to do very simple and very sophisticated tasks. For example a student might require a handout on some simple procedure or complex guidance with aspects of a post-graduate dissertation. Second, attendance at the Centre is erratic: sometimes extra tutorial support is required and sometimes slots remain vacant. Some wastage is unavoidable and of course students don't always turn up to pre-booked sessions, but we seem to have reached a fair compromise by making a clear distinction between the front-desk and tutor roles and by having a team of tutors on standby to meet extra demand. Front-deskers sometimes switch between roles and are paid accordingly.
- As we get busier, it is harder to maintain the 'drop-in' flavour of the Centre. We have less flexible time to spend with students and this could mean that those with concerns don't have an opportunity to air them.
- It is obviously important to demonstrate the worth of the Centre. It is reasonably straightforward to keep records of users, but it is not so easy to demonstrate our contribution to student achievement and retention. We keep anecdotal records of feedback, but still need to find better ways to measure our impact without intimidating our visitors.

## Evidence of Success

The number of visits has increased steadily each year: each time the service is extended, the demand grows. The number of maths tutorials delivered during Semester A 2001/2002 was 209. Many of our visitors return and yearly snapshot questionnaire responses indicate a high level of student satisfaction.

At a University level, the Centre's activity has recently been incorporated into the University's Annual Monitoring Exercise: we submit a yearly report which is then reviewed by our Quality Assurance Committee.

## How Can Other Academics Reproduce this?

The following list of recommendations summarizes what we consider to be the most important features of a successful study support facility.

### ■ Location

A study support centre works best if it is part of the main activity of a university or college. Users should be able to come across the centre whilst doing other business. Once there, there should be opportunities to browse in open spaces and to be somewhere more secluded for one-to-one or small group tutorials.

### ■ Line management

It can be difficult to know where a study support facility fits in terms of line-management. It obviously doesn't sit easily in an individual teaching school if it is to have a University-wide function. Other sensible options seem to be learning resource centres, student service departments and variations of teaching and learning units. Each obviously has its own culture and emphases and these must be weighed carefully against the Centre's aims. We have tried to maintain a teaching and learning bias rather than a specific learning needs or resource one.

### ■ Staff mix

We have found it best not to combine the general guidance and tutor roles. We lose out on spontaneity because students can rarely just 'drop in' for immediate specialist support, but we guarantee students some kind of attention almost immediately and maximize tutor time by pre-arranging all tutorials.

### ■ Friendliness and firmness

All staff must have friendly dispositions because most students feel vulnerable on first visits and sometimes study problems mask deeper personal problems. They must also learn to create mental boundaries so that students do not expect too much from them in terms of help and time.

### ■ Engaging support from academic schools

Any general support facility has to work extra hard to gain recognition and respect from individual teaching schools. Using school recommended tutors has been the best way for us to build bridges. We are always quick to respond when a school approaches us to deliver a study skills programme and we work very hard to tailor our delivery to particular student groups.

### ■ Staff development

It wasn't until we began our staff development programme that we realized just how useful it is. It is odd to spend just a few hours working in the Centre without having a sense of its bigger aims and developments. Part-timers appreciate the chance to share experiences and we tend to carry similar concerns and insights. Making the most of the one-to-one learning encounter seems to require a lot of thought.