

Academic Help-Seeking and Outsourced Support in Higher Education

Subjects: Education & Educational Research

Contributor: Lorraine Delaney, Mark Brown, Eamon Costello

The growth in online higher education has seen the 'unbundling' of some services as universities have partnered with private companies in an effort to enhance their services.

Keywords: student ; academic ; support ; Studiosity ; online

1. Introduction

The growth in online higher education has seen the 'unbundling' of some services as universities have partnered with private companies in an effort to enhance student support ^[1]. Unbundling is defined by Swinnerton et al. ^[2] (p. 218) as the 'disaggregation of educational provision into its component parts'. This process can involve multiple stakeholders using digital approaches.

Within universities, the provision of enhanced academic support and development for students has become ubiquitous. The main reason given for this focus is to enhance student retention and success ^{[3][4][5][6]}. Linking student success and institutional quality is becoming increasingly prevalent, and the role of academic support and development services is now a taken-for-granted part of effective student support. Yet, relatively little is known about the nature of academic help-seeking in general ^[3], and most especially in an Irish context.

In 2018, a decision was taken to pilot Studiosity for DCU, managed centrally by the Open Education Unit (OEU), a department with a long history of widening access to university education through distance learning. This decision was primarily made because distance students found it difficult to access existing academic support and development services primarily designed for campus-based learners. While online meetings were possible, it was difficult to obtain appointments outside of normal working hours that suited the study habits of part-time online learners. Student support and development services were generally provided during the day, with few evening and no weekend appointments.

2. The Role of Academic Support

The literature on the role of academic support primarily focuses on its ability to enhance retention and persistence. Some studies focus on enhanced academic support for undergraduate students ^{[4][7][8][9][10][11][12][13]}. Often this support is targeted at underrepresented first-year students who are poorly prepared for university and may enter the institution with limited background academic capital to the extent that they may have little specific knowledge about how university 'works' ^[14]. The role here is one of attempting to level the playing field to address structural inequalities and support successful completion.

Other studies focus on supporting the persistence of all students equally, undergraduate and postgraduate ^{[5][15][16][17][18]}. These studies reason that undergraduate and postgraduate students face similar challenges when transitioning to university ^{[18][19][20]}. But postgraduate students have, by definition, successfully made that transition. Additionally, there is less evidence that high attrition rates are problematic in postgraduate education. Such studies appear at odds with those identifying a greater need in the undergraduate, underrepresented cohort.

3. Provision of Academic Support

Academic support can be either formal, accessed within or through the institution, or informal, accessed outside the institution through social contacts. The effectiveness of academic support is variably related to its responsiveness ^[5], timing ^[16], flexibility ^[21], quality ^[22], and perhaps most importantly, uptake ^{[11][23]}.

Within the institution, academic support is often offered on campus and in person. The advantages of this Socratic style are well documented [7][11][12]. Students develop transferable skills such as problem posing, problem solving, and critical thinking. However, there are problems with this type of support. It is often restricted to office hours, and so does not serve the needs of part-time/distance students [6][16]. It can also be presented as more formal as students make appointments and wait to be seen. This delay in obtaining help may be off-putting for less confident learners. Working-class first-year undergraduate students are less likely to initiate formal help-seeking [17][24], and are more likely to ask for help from peers over professors [4][17]. While peer support is hailed as valuable for underrepresented undergraduate students [17], there are inherent dangers; peer support may be inaccurate or incorrect. It may therefore be best not to rely on peers for hard information.

Increasingly, technology is playing a role in academic support provision in higher education [5][6][15][16][25]. Online support can be provided by staff within the institution, or it can be outsourced to a third party, a practice known as 'unbundling' or 'distributed' support. Benzie and Harper [9] (p. 645) argue that academic support in more distributed learning environments is problematic because '...they contribute to a context for writing that is unbounded, generic, and fragmented'. This criticism is echoed by Gurney and Grossi [26], who state that the capacity of third-party providers to develop students' autonomy as academic communicators is restricted. They tend to 'fix' students' work, rather than encouraging them to think autonomously. Rambiritch [12] (p. 58) also sees such consultations as editing rather than dialogue and calls for 'evaluating the quality of such contributions to student development'.

Yet technology can and does support dialogue, both synchronous and asynchronous. Amador and Amador [8] report on the success of Facebook in generating a sense of community through online interactions. A study of *Live chat* by Broadbent and Lodge [10] highlighted how responsive the service was, particularly for online students, who felt more cared-for and connected to the institution due to the service. Dollinger et al. [16] also report positively on the *Connect Live* service offered by Studiosity, where students were connected in real time with a human tutor, to support their learning. However, while the potential exists for dialogue in the online environment, the extent to which dialogue or, in a related sense, instrumental support, takes place is not explored.

There are challenges with third-party support. There can be problems with acceptance of such provision within the institutional culture, problems with different tutors giving different advice, and overly positive feedback being provided to students by the third party [4][6][9]. Notwithstanding such criticism, the availability of online support outside regular office hours is particularly welcomed by students, especially students who are working, or are living in time zones which differ from the institution [16]. Evaluations of online support generally receive high student satisfaction ratings [15][16].

4. Academic Help-Seeking

Academic help-seeking relates to students seeking help with academic learning [22][27][28], primarily in relation to understanding course content [29]. Within the literature, help-seeking is broadly divided into two categories: instrumental and expedient [27].

While instrumental help-seeking often takes the form of dialogue [9][12], it more generally relates to the student seeking to solve the problem themselves by asking for explanations of concepts they do not understand [22].

Conversely, expedient help-seeking is seen to be asking for help with something one is/should be capable of solving oneself [29]. What one is capable of solving oneself is likely to be different for different student cohorts, though this point is not fully addressed in the literature.

While Calarco [29] identifies that both methods of help-seeking lead to improved academic performance, this is disputed by Golann and Darling-Aduana [30], who point out that with expedient help-seeking, students become over-reliant on others, limiting higher-order cognition. Expedient help-seeking is therefore regarded as less likely to lead to deep learning, and so is sometimes regarded as of less value than instrumental help-seeking [9][12][22][26][31].

The literature highlights how first-generation undergraduate students prefer to engage in less formal help-seeking, with a preference for resources that are convenient, reliable, easy to access and online [17][32]. Certainly, to overcome any internalised stigma against help-seeking [33], and reframe the way students view it [17][34], the importance of informal style, accessible help is important. While students with high levels of academic capital may be able to avail themselves of this type of help through their social networks, this option is not often open to working-class students who may be the first in their family to attend college and may have few friends progressing to university. So although expedient help is seen as less valuable in the literature, for some students, expedient help-seeking may be a prerequisite to instrumental help-

seeking. It may break down barriers to help-seeking and allow students to see it as a normal aspect of university study. This may be particularly important for underrepresented undergraduate students.

What Bourdieu ^{[35][36][37]} recognised as 'cultural or academic capital' and Lareau ^[38] as a 'sense of entitlement' results in students from more middle-class backgrounds having assertiveness and an ease in interacting with authority ^[30]. Those from more working-class backgrounds tend to operate with 'a sense of constraint' ^[39], showing more caution when interacting with authorities or avoiding interaction altogether. This practice persists to the extent that by the time students enter university, their help-seeking behaviour tends to be well established ^{[27][30]}.

References

1. Morris, N.P.; Ivancheva, M.; Coop, T.; Mogliacci, R.; Swinnerton, B. Negotiating growth of online education in higher education. *Int. J. Educ. Technol. High. Educ.* 2020, 17, 48.
2. Swinnerton, B.; Ivancheva, M.; Coop, T.; Perrotta, C.; Morris, N.P.; Swartz, R.; Czerniewicz, L.; Cliff, A.; Walji, S. The Unbundled University: Researching emerging models in an unequal landscape. Preliminary findings from fieldwork in South Africa. In *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Networked Learning 2018, Zagreb, Croatia, 14–16 May 2018*.
3. Bornschlegl, M.; Meldrum, K.; Caltabiano, N.J. Variables related to Academic Help-Seeking Behaviour in Higher Education—Findings from a Multidisciplinary Perspective. *Rev. Educ.* 2020, 8, 486–522.
4. Bornschlegl, M.; Caltabiano, N.J. Increasing Accessibility to Academic Support in Higher Education for Diverse Student Cohorts. *Teach. Learn. Inq.* 2022, 10, 1–18.
5. Walsh, C.; Mitala, A.; Ratcliff, M.; Yap, A.; Jamaledine, Z. A public-private partnership to transform online education through high levels of academic student support. *Australas. J. Educ. Technol.* 2020, 36, 30–45.
6. Wilson, G.; McAuley, A.; Ashton-Hay, S.; van Eyk, T. Just when I needed you most: Establishing on-demand learning support in a regional university. *Australas. J. Educ. Technol.* 2020, 36, 1–12.
7. Netanda, R.S.; Mamabolo, J.; Themane, M. Do or die: Student support interventions for the survival of distance education institutions in a competitive higher education system. *Stud. High. Educ.* 2019, 44, 397–414.
8. Amador, P.V.; Amador, J.M. Academic Help Seeking: A Framework for Conceptualizing Facebook Use for Higher Education Support. *TechTrends* 2017, 61, 195–202.
9. Benzie, H.J.; Harper, R. Developing student writing in higher education: Digital third- party products in distributed learning environments. *Teach. High. Educ.* 2020, 25, 633–647.
10. Broadbent, J.; Lodge, J. Use of live chat in higher education to support self-regulated help seeking behaviours: A comparison of online and blended learner perspectives. *Int. J. Educ. Technol. High. Educ.* 2021, 18, 17.
11. Leenknecht, M.; Hompus, P.; van der Schaaf, M. Feedback seeking behaviour in higher education: The association with students' goal orientation and deep learning approach, *Assess. Eval. High. Educ.* 2019, 44, 1069–1078.
12. Rambiritch, A. A Social Justice Approach to Providing Academic Writing Support. *Educ. Res. Soc. Change* 2018, 7, 46–60.
13. Xie, D.; Xie, Z. Effects of undergraduates' academic self-efficacy on their academic help-seeking behaviors: The mediating effect of professional commitment and the moderating effect of gender. *J. Coll. Stud. Dev.* 2019, 60, 365–371.
14. Watson, J. Profitable portfolios: Capital that counts in higher education. *Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* 2013, 34, 412–430.
15. O'Neill, R.; Russell, A.M.T. Stop! Grammar time: University students' perceptions of the automated feedback program Grammarly. *Australas. J. Educ. Technol.* 2019, 35, 42–56.
16. Dollinger, M.; Cox, S.; Eaton, R.; Vanderlelie, J.; Ridsdale, S. Investigating the Usage and Perceptions of Third-Party Online Learning Support Services for Diverse Students. *J. Interact. Media Educ.* 2020, 14, 1–9.
17. Payne, T.; Muenks, K.; Aguayo, E. "Just Because I am First Gen Doesn't Mean I'm Not Asking for Help": A Thematic Analysis of First-Generation College Students' Academic Help-Seeking Behaviors. *J. Divers. High. Educ.* 2021, 23, 1–12.
18. Sanagavarapu, P.; Abraham, J. Validating the relationship between beginning students' transitional challenges, well-being, help-seeking, and their adjustments in an Australian university. *J. Furth. High. Educ.* 2021, 45, 616–628.
19. Bates, E.; McCann, J.J.; Haynes, R.; Harland, L. An Exploration of Student Satisfaction Using Photographic Elicitation: Differences between Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students. In *Proceedings of the Higher Education Academy*

20. Mcpherson, C.; Punch, S.; Graham, E. Transition from Undergraduate to Taught Post Graduate Study: Emotion, Integration and Belonging. *J. Perspect. Appl. Acad. Pract.* 2017, 5, 42–50.
21. Kelly, A.; Johnston, N.; Matthews, S. Online self-access learning support during the COVID-19 pandemic: An Australian University case study. *Stud. Self-Access Learn. J.* 2020, 11, 187–198.
22. Fong, C.J.; Gonzales, C.; Hill-Troglin Cox, C.; Shinn, H.B. Academic Help-Seeking and Achievement of Postsecondary Students: A Meta-Analytic Investigation. *J. Educ. Psychol.* 2023, 115, 1–21.
23. Marineo, F.; Shi, Q. Supporting student success in the first-year experience: Library instruction in the learning management system. *J. Libr. Inf. Serv. Distance Learn.* 2019, 13, 40–55.
24. Schwartz, S.E.O.; Kanchewa, S.S.; Rhodes, J.E.; Gowdy, G.; Stark, A.M.; Horn, J.P.; Parnes, M.; Spencer, R. "I'm having a little struggle with this, can you help me out?": Examining impacts and processes of a social capital intervention for first-generation college students. *Am. J. Community Psychol.* 2018, 61, 166–178.
25. Rotar, O. Online student support: A framework for embedding support interventions into the online learning cycle. *Res. Pract. Technol. Enhanc. Learn.* 2022, 17, 2.
26. Gurney, L.; Grossi, V. Performing support in higher education: Negotiating conflicting agendas in academic language and learning advisory work. *High. Educ. Res. Dev.* 2019, 38, 940–953.
27. Martín-Arbós, S.; Castarlenas, E.; Dueñas, J.-M. Help-Seeking in an Academic Context: A Systematic Review. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 4460.
28. Lee, Y.; Choi, J. A review of online course dropout research: Implications for practice and future research. *Educ. Technol. Res. Dev.* 2011, 59, 593–618.
29. Calarco, J.M. "I Need Help!" Social Class and Children's Help-Seeking in Elementary School. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 2011, 76, 862–882.
30. Golann, J.W.; Darling-Aduana, J. Toward a multifaceted understanding of Lareau's "sense of entitlement": Bridging sociological and psychological constructs. *Sociol. Compass* 2020, 14, e12798.
31. Hamilton, J. Learning support literacy: Promoting independent learning skills and effective help-seeking behaviours in HE students. *J. Acad. Lang. Learn.* 2020, 14, 69–76.
32. Giblin, J.; Stefaniak, J. Examining decision-making processes and heuristics in academic help-seeking and instructional environments. *TechTrends* 2021, 65, 101–110.
33. Winograd, G.; Rust, J.P. Stigma, awareness of support services, and academic help-seeking among historically underrepresented first-year college students. *Learn. Assist. Rev. (TLAR)* 2014, 19, 17–41.
34. Castillo-Montoya, M.; Ives, J. Transformative practices to support first-generation college students as academic learners: Findings from a systematic literature review. *J. First-Gener. Stud. Success* 2021, 1, 20–31.
35. Bourdieu, P. Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*; Brown, R., Ed.; Tavistock: London, UK, 1973.
36. Bourdieu, P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*; Nice, R., Translator; Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, UK, 1979.
37. Bourdieu, P. The forms of capital. In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*; Robinson, J.G., Ed.; Greenwood Press: New York, NY, USA, 1986.
38. Lareau, A. Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 2002, 67, 747–776.
39. Chesters, J.; Watson, L. Returns to education for those returning to education: Evidence from Australia. *Stud. High. Educ.* 2014, 39, 1634–1648.