Advising Students With Academic Difficulties

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Introduction

Until quite recently, guidance on study difficulties was often seen as a way of helping the 'weak' or 'less able' undergraduate student. A student who experienced difficulties, it was assumed, was likely to be poorly motivated, lacked aptitude for the subject, or had a poor grasp of fundamentals — perhaps because of deficiencies in his or her previous educational experiences, at school or college. Study support was therefore seen as a form of academic salvage, designed for those who managed to slip through a tight selection net, and aimed at improving their chances of surviving the course.

This narrow and rather harsh view of study difficulties is no longer accepted. It is now widely recognized, for example, that even the ablest of our students may at some point falter or stumble, perhaps because the demands of the subject have taken a new and unfamiliar turn, perhaps for seemingly extraneous reasons — financial worries, or a pressing personal problem.

Equally, a better understanding of what studying for a degree entails (mainly as a result of research over the last decade) has led us to pay due recognition to its complexities. Being able to study effectively is not a capacity one either does or does not have, nor is it something which a good school can fully equip pupils with, as preparation for university study.

Study strategies which work well in one discipline may be inappropriate or unrewarding in another. Skills which brought academic success at one level (be it Highers, "A" levels, a first-year undergraduate course or final year Honours) may prove to be poorly attuned to the requirements of a higher and more demanding level of study.

Learning how to learn, then, is an unfolding process, subject to continual refinement. Any student may therefore encounter study difficulties at some time or another, and will benefit from an opportunity to take stock, identify stumbling blocks to progress, and experiment with new ways of tackling academic work.

A three step approach

Once a student has sought advice, how might you proceed? Three main steps can be identified:

- clarifying the situation
- pinpointing the problem
- working out a course of action

The questions to be asked at each step, and the relative importance of one step to another, will of course vary from case to case. In some instances problems are hard to pinpoint; but once identified, an appropriate course of action can be quickly devised. In others, the problem is straightforward but finding the best way of tackling it is far from easy.

Step 1: Clarify the situation

The first step is to try to ensure that you have as full a picture as possible of the situation. This is of course desirable in any form of guidance, but it is particularly important where study difficulties are concerned.

When they ask for help, some students are unable to account for their unease: they feel anxious, uncertain, perhaps even overwhelmed by competing study demands, but unsure about what is unsettling them. Others latch onto an explanation that seems less cause than symptom:

- "I've never been very good at concentrating";
- "This subject just doesn't interest me anymore";
- or opt for a way of resolving the problem which sidesteps it rather than probes the underlying difficulties:
- "I need to transfer to another course";
- "I want to leave University. I'm just not cut out for academic work".

Like anyone in a perplexing predicament, students' first need is to see themselves and their circumstances in a clearer light. Besides being a willing listener, you can help to sound out their understanding, and your own, by questioning on a broad front.

You should aim to:

Establish facts

Check against your records, to ensure that any relevant information - e.g. on the student's choice of courses, course or exam grades, term-time address, financial circumstances - is accurate and up-to-date.

If the student is behind with coursework, establish what work is outstanding, for what deadlines. If the student has not been going to classes, ask when this began, and for which classes.

Ascertain feelings

How does the student feel about the situation? This seems an obvious question, but feelings and perceptions often lie dormant or unconsidered.

A student may be reacting to a bad mark, some very critical comments, an alleged shortcoming, but is preoccupied with what they may say about others' perceptions of him or her, rather than with how he or she personally views the mark or the wounding comment.

A student may have plumped for a quick way out of the problem (e.g. "I should leave University") without having explored how he or she might feel about missed opportunities or thwarted aspirations.

Sometimes, by contrast, the student's own feelings have been paramount, and it is how others might feel that remains unconsidered. A fuller understanding may therefore come from questions about the perceptions of family, other students, close friends or tutors.

Explore the background

It may be important to try to pinpoint when feelings of unease began, or what might have given rise to them. Equally, questions which help to set a difficulty in its context may provide a counterweight to excessive self-doubt. Three low marks in a row are unsettling, but mean little by themselves. Did they follow a series of good marks, for example, which would indicate that the student had until some point or other been coping well with the demands of the course? Or are they perhaps confined to one particular course, contrasting sharply with a pattern of success elsewhere?

Widening the focus is also necessary since worries or a loss of confidence in one facet of a student's life can spill over into others. Difficulties in one course may foster a general loss of confidence in one's academic abilities, even though achievement on other courses has been more than satisfactory.

Or, as is frequently the case, non-academic concerns overwhelm academic ones. Financial worries, difficulties in a personal relationship, accommodation problems, bereavement, or the breakdown of one's parents' marriage - any of these may be distracting and make it hard to concentrate or study effectively.

To the student, however, the problem may seem to be simply a study difficulty, or to treat it as such may at first seem a more comfortable way of trying to cope. Here you must exercise careful judgement: a student may be reluctant to share information about his or her personal life, and this wish must be respected.

You have no right to information save at the student's discretion. Yet not knowing the full facts is not necessarily a barrier to progress. You can encourage the student to consider what bearing a personal problem might have on study difficulties, even though the problem itself remains undisclosed.

And the student can be encouraged, too, to talk through the problem with someone else - a close friend, perhaps - in whom he or she feels able to confide.

Step 2: Pinpoint the problem

Once you and the student have a clearer view of the situation, the next step is to try to pinpoint the problem as accurately as possible. In many instances, this may present no great difficulty. The student can readily attribute growing anxiety and a loss of confidence to, for example, an inability to organize time effectively, to marshall working notes into a coherent form for an essay or report, or to complete work sheets or assigned reading at an adequate speed.

In these circumstances, you could proceed immediately to the next stage (see *Step Three*) and work out a plan of action. Before doing so, however, you should feel confident that the diagnosis is correct and that you have a reasonably sharp impression of the nature of the problem and of how it impedes the student's progress.

If not, it may help to follow some or all of the procedures below, which are designed for circumstances in which the problem is not well defined. In order to locate a problem which is ill-defined or elusive, you should try to see the situation through the student's eyes.

You should aim to:

Talk it through

If the student is encouraged to describe to you, as fully as possible, how he or she goes about a particular study task, it will help both of you. It will enable you to see the difficulties in the context of the student's subject and day-to-day work, but it is likely to broaden the student's understanding too.

Many everyday activities become so familiar to us that we proceed without deliberation, following ingrained routines and established habits of mind. It then requires a special effort to reflect on what we do, and why. An invitation to 'talk it through' with someone else can powerfully aid reflection and recall: it helps give pause for thought, challenges us to think through our actions and what prompted us to follow one pathway rather than another.

Feelings and perceptions, too, can be more searchingly explored. The student who can only see a way out in a change of course can be questioned about past feelings about the subject. If it was a subject chosen at school, presumably the student had at some stage found it attractive and well within

his or her capabilities. Exploring the earlier and more positive feelings can help to trace a changed perception, and the circumstances which gave rise to it.

The sticking-point may consequently appear in a new light - not as an insurmountable obstacle, but as something which can be overcome, and so restore an enthusiasm for the subject.

Perceptions and expectations can be even more fundamental. However a student tackles a study task, the approach he or she adopts, consciously or unconsciously, will be bound up with a perception of its underlying purpose.

Yet the student's grasp of what is required may be at variance with the tutor's - the student, for example, aiming to regurgitate facts while the tutor puts a premium on reasoned argument. Trying out an alternative strategy will not circumvent the difficulty if the student's sense of purpose is misdirected. It is only when a student shares a tutor's conceptions of the demands of the task that he or she can recognise a strategy as an appropriate one, and redirect his or her efforts towards those ends.

Focus on concrete examples

Whether it is actions or perceptions that are being explored, try to make the exploration as specific as possible.

The less accomplished a student is, the harder it may be to reflect on study experiences. Less accomplished students tend to take learning and studying for granted, rather than approaching them as activities which they can examine, dissect and review. It is therefore important to shift the discussion beyond generalities. Asking students how they go about writing a report or an essay may be unilluminating if they have never considered the strategies they habitually adopt.

Try instead starting from the particular rather than the general:

- What reports have you written this term?
- Could you tell me about the most recent one you submitted?
- What was the topic, for example, and what sort of a deadline were you given? Was there extra reading to do, or was it a question of working from notes you already had?
- What was the first thing you did? And the next?
- Is that typical of how you go about writing reports?

Sometimes a student may be unable to recall a study task in sufficient detail, or perhaps you do not find it easy (especially if the subject is unfamiliar to you) to envisage what the task required. In these circumstances, you could invite the student to bring along study materials, so that you can be talked through a worksheet or shown what made a set of notes difficult to organize into a coherent whole.

Review methods and purposes

Attentive listening and focussed questioning should bring rich insights into a student's difficulties and the circumstances in which these arise. But before moving onto remedies, it will be worthwhile to review what has been gleaned.

As an adviser, your contribution at this point is more than simply summing up, essential though that might be. You can, firstly, aim to set difficulties in a realistic context. You could, for example, remind the student of all the things he or she is doing well, so that a specific difficulty is seen in relation to a larger pattern of achievement - i.e. as a minor hitch rather than a major setback.

You might reassure the student that the difficulty identified is one commonly encountered, or point out that most of the student's study strategies are widely followed and admirably well-suited to academic demands. Most important of all, you can deploy your academic expertise to help "unpack" difficulties that stem from the inter-relatedness of study processes.

The student, to take one example, may have come to see a difficulty in writing essays as one of marshalling disparate notes into a coherent whole - whereas the student's account of an essay-writing experience reveals to you that the main shortcoming lies earlier, in insufficient reflection about the question set and its implications for note-taking.

To take another example, an ostensible problem of revision strategy takes on a different character when you see the student's notes, which lack a structure and ease of reference that might facilitate (rather than impede) revision.

Step 3: Work out a course of action

Having pinpointed the problem, the next stage is to identify a way of overcoming it.

As with problem diagnosis, the ease with which this can be done will vary from case to case. Indeed, very occasionally you may find no obvious remedy presents itself, even with expert outside help. But this does not mean no progress can be made: your willingness simply to share and explore the problem with the student alone may be enough to make it less intractable. In most cases, however, a course of action can be readily identified.

Following the steps below should help to ensure that it is an appropriate one:

Explore alternatives

Study skills advice used to rely on idealised models of study behaviour. It was unflinchingly prescriptive. A student not coping well with academic reading, for instance, would be urged to follow a technique such as SQR3 (Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review). Nowadays we have come to recognise the limitations of unqualified prescription.

First, it is evident that any simple technique will be appropriate in some circumstances and inappropriate in others. Thus the SQR3 technique may help to assimilate a chapter which requires close study, but is cumbersome when the task is to home in on the most relevant items in a lengthy reading list.

Second, as indicated above, no student can study effectively without a clear sense of the purposes towards which his or her activities should be directed. A consideration of possible strategies must therefore be grounded in an understanding of aims, and of the purposes to which any one strategy or technique might lend itself.

Thirdly, study habits tend to be deeply ingrained and to reflect personal preferences. Each of us has evolved a personal study style that we find congenial. Wherever we need to adapt our accustomed way of working - to meet new demands, altered purposes, an unfamiliar context -we prefer to do so in ways which match our personal style rather than cause us to abandon it altogether.

Study guidance is therefore unlikely to be effective if it is rigidly prescriptive or submerges purposes n favour of technique. This does not mean, however, that remedies should not be canvassed. On the contrary, students overcome difficulties not just by understanding them but by finding ways of surmounting them.

The essential thing is to consider alternatives, so long as these are appropriate to the purpose and nature of the task. The organization of time, a commonplace study difficulty, can illustrate this. Though guides to studying frequently advocate the use of a finely drawn timetable, there are many students who find this an unwelcome constraint.

Yet there are alternatives:

- keeping a diary with specific deadlines clearly marked;
- adopting a less rigid timetable that specifies how some hours should be spent but leaves others open;

- devoting ten minutes at the end of each day's work to deciding what the following day's priorities should be;
- using a clipboard as a checklist of work done and work still to be completed;
- monitoring how one's time is spent with the aim of allocating more realistic targets to specific tasks;
- using larger blocks of private study time (an afternoon, say) for work such as essay- and report-writing which need sustained effort.

Any of these possibilities can help disorganised students to manage their time more effectively and meet deadlines.

A word of caution is nonetheless appropriate. There may be instances where only one option presents itself: clearly to embark on a quest for alternatives in such circumstances would have little point.

Furthermore there are sometimes students whose level of anxiety is such that any contemplation of alternatives will make matters worse rather than better. For such students, firmer prescription may be constructive, at least until their anxiety diminishes and they are in a position to approach their work in a more open and relaxed frame of mind.

Agree a realistic plan of action

No Director of Studies (or equivalent) should feel that it is his or her prime responsibility to canvass alternative strategies and indeed in many cases you will feel unable to do so - whether because their knowledge of specific options is limited or because of the time and effort needed.

But it is in any case desirable that students are actively involved in coming to terms with their difficulties: that is, not leaving it to you to resolve the difficulties for them, but instead playing a real part in the pinpointing of difficulties, the exploration of alternatives, and the choice of a course of action.

In this respect, you can call on a variety of resources. There are extensive collections of books and other materials on study skills in the University Library and any well stocked bookshop will always have a selection of study guides available.

Fellow students and friends are another valuable resource: the student who is

unsure about how to set about a study task could make a useful start by sounding out other students on the strategies they follow.

And the assistance of lecturers and tutors can also be called upon. Some students are hesitant about buttonholing lecturers for fear of appearing 'pushy' or simply stupid – even though the resolution of their difficulty requires a depth of knowledge that only the lecturer possesses.

Their hesitancy, however, will be less of an obstacle if the difficulty has already been discussed and is more clearly pinpointed. It can be helpful, too, for a Director sometimes to act as a gobetween, perhaps even suggesting that

the lecturer circumvents the student's hesitancy by making the first approach.

Once the student is better briefed on alternatives, you can help in reviewing these or discussing them further. Sometimes strategies are less problematic than purposes. It is coming to a new understanding of the aims of, say, academic reading or tutorials that takes time to assimilate: allying this to an appropriate strategy presents less difficulty.

Sometimes the student may need encouraging to adapt a new-found strategy to individual need, rather than adopting it wholesale (which may be much less effective).

And sometimes the process of consultation will have brought to light two or three aspects of study strategy in need of overhaul. Here you can counsel realism in advising a way forward that is not over-ambitious and deals with difficulties one at a time.

Monitor and follow-up advice given

Change is a gradual process, not a sudden one. There will be students for whom a single consultation will suffice. Once the problem has been pinpointed or a more appropriate strategy identified, they will feel able to make further progress by themselves.

But there will be others for whom progress is much more arduous. They may need additional help: reassurance that they are on the right track, or the opportunity of having you look over subsequent work and advise them on how well they have succeeded in surmounting earlier difficulties.

In cases where a student seems to lack confidence, or where you anticipate problems in implementing advice, you should consider pencilling in an appointment for a later date.

Guidance can appear self-defeating to someone who has been given help yet has not found this sufficient to overcome their difficulties. Having sought help once, they are reluctant to impose upon someone a second time. Agreeing a follow-up appointment should avoid this possibility, while enabling you to monitor whether the advice given was effective.

Source

This resource has been adapted from the previous Handbook for Directors of Studies.