

## STUDENT NEEDS

The expansion of higher education has enabled a larger number of students to attend university courses but those of below average ability may find difficulties in coping academically. This may be exacerbated by difficulties in social adjustment, time management, and work/play balances which might be experienced. University staff make considerable efforts to support such students because: many university missions include an aspiration to develop each student to their maximum potential; students leaving before completion of their degree represent a waste of student time and money invested; there is a waste of university resource in providing the teaching and facilities which the student has consumed without attaining a degree; income to the university is reduced significantly; retention rate may influence university funding, affect position in league tables and affect choices prospective students might make.

The cost of supporting struggling students is considerable and includes the resit examination system as well as extra tutorial provision, counselling, and a variety of interviews to help, cajole, frighten or persuade the student to perform better.

While this is of great assistance to the less able student who is well below the mean in terms of ability, there is a second group of students who are just as far above the mean ability range as the less able student is below it for whom little special provision is made. Generally, these very able students are left to their own devices on the basis that they will be OK and will graduate anyway. They are no trouble and do not cause a loss of income, or reputation, in the university ratings game.

We do not stretch and fully develop these students and this is in conflict with many university mission statements which talk of developing each student to their full potential – not just the less able ones. These very able students may be the lifeblood of our disciplines, making the advances and changes which lay the foundations for wealth creation and development in the future.

Stretching students is not just getting them to learn more facts at undergraduate level, i.e. doing more of the same. It should be about taking them faster to a higher level of knowledge and skills and increasing development of high level graduate skills such as problem solving, critical analysis, innovation, creativity, synthesis of new ideas and integration of ideas across subject boundaries.

It is not immediately obvious how this can be achieved but some possibilities are: streaming according to ability might help but is too staff intensive and it is probably too coarse a technique to fully develop the outstandingly bright student who might represent 1 in 100; it might be possible to include extra optional material in the undergraduate degree and thus give outstanding students the opportunity to obtain a 'starred' degree (as is proposed for 'A' level); a more workable possibility, which copes with the reality that there will be very few really outstanding students in each discipline in each university, revolves around the 'masterclass' concept.

'Masterclasses' would be run on a national basis during vacations. Such 1-5 day courses could be provided by universities, by learned societies, by Higher Education Academy Subject Centres or by industry. Students would be selected to attend on the basis of an application which might include an assessed piece of work and would contribute a small amount to the cost of providing the (highly subsidised) course. A certificate would credit satisfactory completion of the course.

Whatever turns out to be possible we should not just be helping weak students to succeed but we should also be stretching our able students to achieve their full potential. There is more than one way of failing a proportion of students.

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