

## **Title: Closing the awarding gap: The role of the Personal Learning Advisor (PLA) service at the Open University (OU)**

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This case study details how a centralised, primary role, advising service can provide specialist 1-1 and group coaching and mentoring to students identified in the Access and Participation Plan to address institutional awarding gaps. The lessons learned are transferable to the sector in terms of not only the direct benefits of the service (students who engaged in the service completed and passed modules at a higher rate than those who did not engage), but also the insights from students about the challenges they faced with their studies, having provided them with a 'safe space' where they could talk about them.

The Personal Learning Advisor (PLA) service at the Open University (OU) was set up in 2021 to support the closure of awarding gaps identified in the Access and Participation Plan (APP) and will run until December 2024. In advising and tutoring terms, the PLA Service is a centralised team of 22 specialist 'primary role' advisors (without a teaching or research workload) who provide coaching and mentoring to students.

Our largest projects have supported Black students, seeking to address an institutional deficit by removing barriers rather than an individual deficit caused by the student. Students are identified as eligible via the use of a pass probability percentage model (built upon 70 factors including previous studies and qualifications, engagement levels and demographic data) alongside ethnicity data.

As a specialist service we recruited individuals with developed expertise in coaching and or mentoring, who tailor their support according to the goals the student sets. We conducted recruitment practises which actively encourage applications from candidates that reflect the lived experience of our student populations and/or possess specific experience working with them.

As our advisors are not linked to, or experts in, the students' academic programme they cannot provide subject specific academic advice so we maintain clear boundaries around this. They provide more generalist coaching and mentoring support, and a 'safe space' where students may be more willing to share their experiences knowing the PLA has no decision-making authority over their grades, progression or academic success. As the structure of support at the OU does not include faculty-based personal tutors, our relationships with the students' module tutors are paramount. When a student signs up to work with a PLA we inform their module tutor and often support the student in having the confidence to interact positively with, or understand feedback from, their tutor.

Our largest form of support is provided by 1-1 coaching and mentoring sessions, not dissimilar to a personal tutorial, which are generally non-directive and take place over a relatively short timeframe (such as the duration of a module). We supplement this with group workshops which focus on key areas including understanding feedback, developing motivation, supporting well-being and reflecting on your study journey. In 2021-22 21.2% of eligible students took up at least one of these forms of support.

One of the most valuable insights PLAs have found is recognising, understanding and respecting the intersectionality of the student. Intersecting identities refers to the concept that a student can have multiple identities, as well as experiences that need to be understood in order to fully comprehend the complexity of the students' experience.

For example, a student may identify as being black, disabled, a care leaver and a carer. These identities and experiences influence students' academic journey, and ultimately can impact on their success rate. There is a significant difference in the proportions of Black, students being awarded a good (first or 2:1) undergraduate degree when compared to White students. This is due to a complex interplay of factors that present barriers to education including a lack of awareness of the intersectionality of the student.

We analysed the responses to surveys about our service from 102 students who had attended a 1-1 and 66 who had attended our group workshops as well as gathering the insights of our PLAs based upon their conversations with students. PLAs cite one of the greatest benefits of their coaching conversations with students was the insights gained into the importance students attributed to feeling included, being listened to, and seeing measures been taking place to improve inequality. Students often describe previous negative education experiences where they had been a victim of racism, stereotyping, discrimination or other forms of inequality that impact on their sense of belonging and their success.

They speak of the difficulty about being able to realise their full potential due to a number of issues including those aforementioned, that white students do not experience. For example, they may have received inappropriate academic advice, not known whom to speak to about issues or been poorly signposted. Sometimes students speak about the difficulty in being understood by people who did not share the lived experience and held unfavourable views about their abilities.

Having these conversations with students highlighted the role of having a non-judgemental open space where they could be listened to and receive appropriate support for the barriers that they have cited. In a thematic analysis of our surveys these were categorised as institution communications, academic literacy, disability, digital literacy/poverty, inconsistencies in tutor support and a non-representative curriculum or feelings of being an imposter.

As the PLA project ends in 2024 it is vital that our lessons about these barriers are shared with the institution and wider sector. We have presented summaries to module tutors so they understand the barriers and how they play a role in perpetuating or preventing them. This has led to an increased awareness about the individuality of the student and how their lived experience can impact their success. As well as raising awareness of how biases individual internal biases, teaching biases and institutional systematic biases can combine to negatively affect students.

Students reported in surveys that taking part in our coaching and mentoring sessions has improved their self-confidence and self-efficacy, proactivity in seeking help, ability to recognise their own strengths and achievement, level of personal growth and self-awareness. Statistical measurements among students have found that those who engage with the service are more likely to be retained and achieve higher grades. Though self-selection bias may be an influence we also found a higher completion rate (by 6.9 percentage points) and pass rate (by 7.1 percentage points) in our test group, compared to a control group (in the low-mid pass percentage probability range).

We feel that a centralised specialist advising service can have a considerable impact upon closing awarding gaps – both in terms of the direct support for students and in sharing the learning gained as part of improvements to the wider holistic support for Black students provided by institutions.

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