

Students as Change Agents in Learning and Teaching
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Case study 7 – Law: Comparative study Cornwall/Streatham Law library and personal tutorial systems

Introduction

Students study Law at two University of Exeter campuses, one in Cornwall (Tremough) and one in Exeter itself (Streatham). The student experience is quite different on the two campuses and this study decided to approach this as a comparative review, taking an area at both campuses that students were unsatisfied with and comparing these with the other campus. The areas the students decided that they wished to compare were the Law Libraries of both campuses and the personal tutoring systems.

Methods of data collection

- Questionnaire – A paper-based questionnaire was split into two sections; one section surveyed students about their experiences of their law library and the other about their experiences of personal tutorials. The rationale for this was that, in general, it was known that Exeter-based students were likely to be concerned about personal tutorials whereas Cornwall-based students were largely happy with their provision in this area. Conversely, Cornwall students were disappointed with their library provision whilst Exeter students were, in the main, highly satisfied with theirs. Hence it was hoped that a questionnaire concerned with both areas would help to highlight both strengths and weaknesses in the two kinds of provision.

SSLC members distributed the questionnaire to students at both Cornwall and Streatham campuses. This was complemented by an on-line version. Fifty-six Cornwall students and seventy-one Streatham students completed the questionnaire.

- Focus groups - A focus group was undertaken at both campuses. In Cornwall, four students were involved (two Year 1 and two Year 2 students). At Streatham, six students took part (two from each of Years 1, 2 and 3).

Analysis of data

Law library

Questionnaire findings

Three quarters of students on both campuses indicated that they were satisfied with their law library's opening hours. Most Streatham students felt that their library was well equipped (90%); however, only half of Cornwall students thought this was the case with their library. Three quarters of students at Streatham thought that the library has a large enough stock of hard copies of law journals and reports. This was not the case in Cornwall, where less than half were satisfied with the stock. Students in Cornwall were pleased with online resources and thought that there were sufficient numbers of them; they also found them easy to use and preferred finding sources online than in the library. Streatham students also found online resources easy to use, and two thirds claimed that they preferred finding journals online. Just over half of students at both campuses were happy with loan periods available on books and thought that overnight and short-term loans allowed students to have access to more books than would otherwise be possible.

Three quarters of students at both campuses considered it easy to find and browse for books in the library and the catalogue easy to use. Students at Streatham thought that the shelves were well labelled (84%), journals easy to search (84%) and case reports well organised (77%). Students were less satisfied at Cornwall. Just over half thought the shelves were well labelled, two thirds thought case reports were well organised and journals easy to search. Two thirds of students at Streatham thought that library staff were

helpful, and three quarters of Cornwall students. Only a quarter of Law students at Streatham thought there were enough PCs for student use in the library. Cornwall students were slightly more satisfied; two in five students thought there were sufficient PCs. Two thirds of Cornwall students thought there were sufficient group workspaces in the library, compared to only a quarter of Streatham students. Nearly all Streatham students thought there were enough spaces for private study (92%), compared to only two thirds of Cornwall students. At neither campus did students think that group spaces were well equipped.

Two thirds of students at Streatham were satisfied with the noise levels in the library but one in five were not happy; this was slightly lower for Cornwall students where just over half were happy but a third were not. Three quarters of students in Streatham thought that the atmosphere in the library was conducive to learning, compared to just over half of Cornwall students. Most Streatham students indicated that they felt comfortable working in the law library (87%). Two thirds of Cornwall students indicated the same. Most Streatham students had not noticed any changes in the library resources, although almost half of Cornwall students had noticed recent improvements.

Focus group outcomes

Students were asked about what they liked, how they used the space and what could be improved in relation to the library. Overall, students were reasonably satisfied, especially on the Streatham campus, but they had a number of recommendations for improvements on both campuses.

	Streatham	Cornwall
What is good?	Students thought that the staff were helpful and approachable and everything was easy to find. Students found the variation in work areas useful. They thought the library was well resourced and said that temporary reserve was very useful for core texts - this could be expanded to ensure students had access to key texts.	Students thought that in general that the space available to them in the library was good. They liked having access to IT facilities and different workspaces and could see that the resources were being increased. Students thought the new cataloguing system worked well and enabled them to find the resources they needed and that the librarian was helpful. Second year students had noticed a vast improvement in the library, especially the resources which were available to them.
What library used for	Most students used the library to for research purposes and putting together notes. Many of the students did not write essays in the library, or revise there, because they found it too noisy.	A first year student based on campus tended to use the library for group work and to browse for resources but felt that he would use the library more when he did not have a base on campus. Second year students who were often based quite a way from campus did a lot more work in the library. One student often only used the library to get books but did not remain there as there was no natural light. She thought the library should open 24 hours a day.
Resources	Students used a wide variety of resources in the library and thought that in general the library was well stocked. One student thought that there were not enough international law resources. The students explained that they often used the electronic resources available and found it frustrating that the computer suite was often being used by non-law students and that they then could not get access to the law online resources.	Students liked to browse through journals in the library and thought that the stand that housed the newest copies of journals was useful. However they found it easier to search for law reports online.
Ideas for improvements	Students thought that there should be more space for group work that was separate. If there were areas where students could talk this would mean students would be quieter in designated quiet areas. Students did find it quite noisy at times. They would like more computers made available. Students thought it would be good for	Students wanted more group work areas separate from the main space, which they could book out for group/project work. They felt that more computers and a printer in the law library would be beneficial. The tables they currently have in the library are quite small and very close together and this makes it difficult to work at them. A similar complaint was made about the computers, which they thought were very close together. Sectioning the library, so that on

	<p>key texts to be made available online and for group spaces to be bookable online. First year students often had to work in groups and found it difficult to find space in the library where they were able to speak to each other. They wanted the library to be open earlier and for longer at the weekend.</p>	<p>different floors students could work silently, quietly or be able to talk, would be helpful. Students had been given access to journals from the British library to supplement journals that were not available but could only access these when the librarian was there. Students wanted library resources to continue to increase, especially hard copies of journals. They thought it would be good to book out journals overnight and for there to be a more formal system of booking out law reports. Required reading for modules should be put on short term loan to be more accessible. Students thought that the noise levels in the library could sometimes be distracting. They also suggested it would be nice to have some natural light in the law library.</p>
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Personal tutorials

Most Cornwall students reported being initially contacted by their personal tutors to set up the first tutorial (83%), whereas two thirds of Streatham students indicated this to be the case. Most of both Streatham and Cornwall students had the same personal tutor for the whole of their degree. Three quarters of Cornwall students saw their personal tutors either once a term or more often. However, less than half of Streatham students met with their personal tutors or saw their tutors more than once a term; a third of students saw their tutors only once a year.

Campus	Twice a term	Once a term	Twice a year	Once a year	Has not met personal tutor
% Streatham	12	31	18	31	8
% Cornwall	27	52	8	14	0

Table 1: Number of student meetings with their personal tutor

Three quarters of Streatham students only saw their personal tutor when they specifically asked to set up a meeting. Three quarters of Cornwall students were satisfied with the amount of contact they had with their personal tutor. This was lower for Streatham students (40%). Most students at Cornwall (90%) and three quarters of Streatham students indicated that their tutors were easily contactable. Half of Cornwall students stated that their tutors set up meetings with them on a regular basis and nearly all students were able to set up meeting when they needed them. At Streatham only a fifth of students stated that tutors contacted them, although seven out of ten students did state that they were able to set up meetings easily. A large number (94%) of Cornwall students stated that their personal tutor explained their role to them, but this was once again lower for Streatham students where only two thirds had done so. Similarly, three quarters of Cornwall students indicated that their tutors made the purpose of tutorials clear to them, compared to only a third of Streatham tutors.

Just over half of Streatham students felt they could approach their tutors if they were struggling with their academic work. Comparatively, three quarters of Cornwall students thought this would be the case. Three quarters of Cornwall students were satisfied with pastoral care received, whereas only two out of five students at Streatham considered this to be the case. A third of students at both Cornwall and Streatham indicated that their tutors kept records of their attendance at tutorials but most indicated they did not know whether their tutors kept a record of their discussions. Two thirds of students were aware that their tutors were informed if they did not attend workshops. At both Streatham and Cornwall, only a few students (22%) had been introduced to the e-PDP resource, a personal development planning tool that is recommended by the University for all students. Most students at either campus were not aware that they could change personal tutors if they had a reason to do so.

Table 2 below indicates differences between what students expect their personal tutors to provide and what they actually do provide. It highlights that students in Cornwall both expected and received more support in most of the areas listed, and also that there is considerable parity between expectations and the areas of support received. Streatham students seemed to expect less and also indicated that tutors provided less support in the areas shown. In addition, there is a considerable mismatch in most areas between expectations and what happens in practice.

% Students	Streatham Expect	Streatham Does	Cornwall Expect	Cornwall Does
Signposts to University support	40	15	66	67
Provide support when falling behind	51	25	66	55
Information regarding academic progress	63	37	74	71
Advice and support for academic work	68	42	79	73
Support personal development	45	28	66	71
Career development	46	28	62	57
Write a reference	26	65	79	73
Provide pastoral support	40	28	47	43

Table 2: Areas in which students expect support and receive support

Table 3 indicates those areas in which students would appreciate additional support and, in particular, those on the Streatham campus.

% Students	Personal issues	Key skills - academic writing, study skills etc.	PDP	Module choice	Career advice	Academic progress
Streatham	12	25	12	45	45	37
Cornwall	11	11	11	36	38	28

Table 3: Areas in which students would like to see more support given

Focus group outcomes

Focus group questions covered the role of personal tutors, student expectations in relation to personal tutoring, what actually happens in a typical tutorial, and what students most value in this context. Although the sample is small, student comments highlight some key features of the tutorial system, many of which are dependent not only on the campus on which they are studying but also relate strongly to their particular tutor. There does not seem to be a common standard of provision either within programmes or across campuses, and not all personal tutors satisfy the expectations of students. None-the-less, many comments are highly positive. Cornwall students seem more clear about the personal tutoring role than those on the Streatham campus.

	Streatham	Cornwall
Role of the personal tutor	Students had different ideas about what the role of the personal tutor is. Some thought tutors should provide them with advice about academic work, and pastoral and personal support. Others thought they were mainly for academic support or that they would mainly signpost them to other services. A first year student thought they should provide information about academic progress. First year students thought that they would not necessarily expect career advice in their first year but that their personal tutor would provide them with this once they moved into later years of study.	Students thought their personal tutors were the first port of call if they needed any help, for example choosing what options to take. Students referred to them as mentors and said they supported their academic development but also generally made sure they were happy about other things like accommodation. Students thought that having their tutors write a reference, provide career advice and pastoral support were the most important areas, alongside the practice of personal tutors giving feedback on assignments.
Role explained	They were generally told what their personal tutors' role was but often found out through friends of other services that they could provide, for example references - which was not something necessarily explained at the start.	Students had initial meetings with their personal tutors where their roles were explained.

References	Some students thought that their tutors were in a position to write references and other students did not think this was the case. A Combined Honours student had had three different tutors during her degree and this had meant it was difficult to build a relationship with a tutor.	Students considered personal tutors had made enough of an effort to get to know them so that they would be able to write an adequate reference. Students had to see their tutors once a term; even if they did not set up meetings themselves they had contact with tutors because of this.
Expectations met?	Most had to make appointments to see their personal tutors. One student's expectation was that she would have to be more self-disciplined and therefore the situation met her expectations because she had to take responsibility and make the appointments. One student said that their personal tutor emailed her to see how she was getting on. A first year student stated that her tutor had not set an appointment with her since the first term, that she did check in with the tutor, but that her tutorials did not cover anything substantial. Overall, the students felt the tutor role was to deal with quite general issues, for example if they were ill during exam periods and could not complete their exams	Students were generally very pleased about their personal tutors. Students had all seen their personal tutors between two and four times a year. Sometimes they were contacted by their tutor; at other times they would go to their tutor about, for example, a difficult assignment. Students thought it was good to see them once a term as a standard amount and that they could get extra support during tutor's office hours. Tutors all put timetables up on their doors every week where students could sign up. They thought it was important that their tutors made time for them when needed. Although one student describes a situation where a tutor rushed her out of the office, the other students thought it was good that their tutors were approachable but did not force them to come with problems if they were getting on well. A first year student said that he had several meetings with his tutor group initially and that they did some group work as well, but had not seen his personal tutor since.
Typical personal tutorial	The tutor asks generally how things are going. The two first year students had only had an initial meeting where they had met their tutor group and been introduced to their tutor, but had not had any emails to set up further tutorials. A second year was getting really good career advice from her tutor and had been signposted to lots of other support services, but did not feel she would necessarily want to speak to a tutor about personal issues - partly because they would be writing a reference for her. Students did not see the personal tutor as someone who should support their personal development. One student thought that she did not expect the personal tutor to provide advice about academic work and was more likely to speak to the module coordinator if she wanted support. One student had only ever seen a tutor when she had a problem.	As well as general discussion about how they were getting on, tutorials mostly revolved around talking about something a student wanted to work on, and this differed quite a lot from student to student. They were able to get feedback on their work from the module coordinator. When they received back any assignments, there would be a feedback lecture for the whole year and students would be able to sign up to speak to the person who had marked the work to get more detailed individual feedback. Students thought that their tutors were good at providing information about academic progress, exams and module choices. They reported going through exam answers with their tutors and being helped to set personal development goals. Students also reported that tutors gave pastoral support and signposted them to other University support services if needed. All students thought they would not necessarily go to their personal tutor for extra support if they were falling behind and were more likely to speak to the relevant module coordinator.
What valued	The two third year students thought tutors had been very valuable - someone with whom they could discuss a variety of things. They felt that the role of the tutor became more important as they progressed through their degrees. First year students thought that their tutors had been friendly and it was good to know that they had support if needed. First year students thought it would have been really useful to have more support on writing essays	Students felt it was good to know that tutors were available if they had any problems, and that they would be supported in a variety of ways.

	<p>and thought the personal tutor would be a good person to provide this. All thought it would be useful if their tutors could provide them with feedback on various aspects of their work (as in Cornwall) but they had not previously thought of this.</p>	
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Summary of Findings

In relation to the Law library, students in Cornwall demonstrated less satisfaction overall, especially with the library stock and lack of space space for private study. It was not considered as conducive to learning as the Streatham law library, and the lack of natural light was of concern, though resources had been noticeably improving. There was concern in both libraries about the amount of noise and the lack of adequate space for those who need to work in groups.

Many of the responses about personal tutorials are dependent not only on the campus on which students are studying, but also relate strongly to their particular tutor. There does not seem to be a common standard of provision either within programmes or across campuses, and not all personal tutors satisfy the expectations of students. None-the-less, many comments are highly positive, The Cornwall-based students are particularly clear about the role of the tutor and expectations for tutorials. Sixty percent of Streatham students were not satisfied with the amount of contact with their tutor, and see tutors less often than in Cornwall where tutors are easier to contact. Even if struggling, some students would not contact a tutor at Streatham.

Recommendations/Solutions

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