

## **OPEN, BUT NOT AIMLESS– GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING OF OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS USING PERSONAL STUDY PLANS**

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### **Summary**

#### ***Open, but not aimless– guidance and counselling of Open University students using personal study plans***

*The students of Open University have great heterogeneity and differing educational goals. The development of the guidance and counselling services is always considered to be a core area of operation. This paper describes the implementation of personal study planning and counselling at the Open University of Kuopio based on the categorisation of the customers according to the purpose of their studies*

*The implementation and development was organized and evaluated as a pilot project supported by the Learning Centre at the University of Kuopio (“Five years-two degrees”-project, funded by the Ministry of Education). The implementation of PSP and counselling was also evaluated.*

*The evaluation revealed that the PSP-guidance model meets the students’ needs, especially when they are aiming for university studies and a degree or a qualification. The evaluation also revealed development needs in the organization of the guidance and counseling services. Based on the evaluation and development results, we suggest that the students aiming for a degree automatically make a PSP in the future. We also suggest that the counselling system should rest on the idea that the forms of counselling are advertised comprehensively, regardless of via which channel the student chooses to contact the Open University.*

### **Development of personal study planning in Finland in view of the Bologna Process**

The Finnish system of higher education currently comprises 20 universities and 28 polytechnics. In 2006, a total of approximately 270 000 students were studying in higher education institutions, 137 500 of them in universities. Furthermore, a total of 74 500 students were completing studies in the Open Universities. The Finnish higher education system is highly committed to the Bologna Process and its principles are applied to the education comprehensively (see Bologna stocktaking – London 2007). Along with adopting the two-tier degree structure, the universities have also developed the students’ learning

processes towards a more flexible and individual direction. The universities have agreed with the Finnish Ministry of Education that they will adopt the personal study plan extensively during the year 2005. Furthermore, the Finnish Ministry of Education has provided funding for the universities' "Five Years – Two Degrees" (5Y2D) project, which aims to support the development of learning processes especially by improving the quality of the curricula and by enhancing the practices pertaining to the personal study plan (see [www.w5w.fi](http://www.w5w.fi)).

Personal study planning is always based on the curriculum; however, in the academic context, it may take various forms depending on the specific nature of the curriculum or the studies. Personal study planning is a process for planning the student's expertise, which is guided throughout the study path. Therefore, personal study planning may carry various meanings and involve several dimensions, and the related documents – personal study plans – may take diversified forms. However, the development of the student's expertise and competences constitute the core elements of study planning and study counselling (Ansela & Haapaniemi 2006, Ansela, Haapaniemi & Pirttimäki 2006).

### **The "Five Years – Two Degrees" (5Y2D) project as a means of developing the PSP and study counselling processes at the University of Kuopio**

The University of Kuopio is home to some 6 200 students. Furthermore, approximately 3 500 students study at the Open University of Kuopio. The "Five Years – Two Degrees" project has been coordinated by the university's Learning Centre. The most central activities implemented by the project have involved providing training for the teaching staff, producing educational materials and guides, carrying out surveys for the project needs, and conducting and managing pilot projects. The pilot projects have been carried out by the university's departments. The Open University of Kuopio launched its own pilot projects in 2006.

### **The 5Y2D pilot project of the Open University of Kuopio**

The Ministry of Education Committee on Lifelong Learning in Universities states in its memo (2005, 15) that "lifelong learning comprises all phases of life from basic education to adult education". Furthermore, lifelong learning in universities largely refers to non-degree studies and Open University students may have very differing educational goals. (Working group memo, 16.)

The role of the Open University in the two-tier degree structure is regarded as significant. The goal is for the Open University to collaborate with the basic and adult education organisations in the development of flexible and individually-oriented modes of study. The development of the guidance and counselling services is always considered to be a core area of operation. Furthermore, throughout the 5Y2D project, the development of study counselling was launched in a more systematic form.

The Ministry of Education Committee on Lifelong Learning in Universities also notes (2005) that it is possible for the universities to improve the students' study skills by offering study counselling, tutoring and courses supporting academic study. This also reflects the goals of the pilot projects. In addition to improving the available study counselling services, teaching methods have also been developed in compliance with the "Blended Learning" ideology.

The development of the PSP at the Open University of Kuopio was carried out in the form of a two-stage pilot project. The first pilot project was called "The PSP of the Open University Student – as an online version and in the study guide – development of personal study plan counselling". The aim of the project was to evaluate the study counselling process, to define the outlines of the PSP process and to develop them as tools for counselling adult students in particular. The goal was to develop adult students' study counselling processes towards a

direction which genuinely supports the student in the planning, beginning and implementation of the studies, especially in view of Open University students aiming at an academic degree. Another goal was to create an online study counselling guide, which would be available for the students' individual use, and to produce a PSP form, which would help the adult students at the Open University in the planning of their studies.

The project started with a survey charting the present PSP practices and comparing the PSP practices, forms and counselling materials used at the other Finnish Open Universities and collaborating educational institutes. A working group addressing the development of teaching is operating at the Open University, and the received materials were discussed in the group. The PSP form created for study planning did considerate the adult student viewpoint and sought to emphasise the nature of university studies. The joint [www.avoinyliopisto.fi](http://www.avoinyliopisto.fi) portal of all Finnish Open Universities was also decided to be utilised in study counselling. The portal includes an academic study guide, which was linked to the Open University website on study counselling.

The creation of a functional tool to support the study counselling processes, i.e. the PSP form, has been set as a goal for development at the Open University ever since the beginning. After the PSP form was created, it was evaluated by the Open University staff, the Language Centre, and individual partners of cooperation. The important points raised included, e.g. the adult student viewpoint and the fact that not all students aim at an academic degree. To support the students, the Open University website opened pages under the heading of "Study guidelines – study skills. The renewed website and the PSP form with its appendices were published in June 2006. After that, the PSP form has been freely available for all students.

The second pilot project, the "Pilot project for the development of the personal study plan", was carried out in 2007–2008. The objective of this project was to include the goal-oriented students in the scope of study counselling to promote the progress of their studies. This was important, as the national focus was shifting towards the development of linearly progressing studies and the availability of studies leading to a lower university degree. Although it is not possible to complete an entire academic degree at the Open University; it, nevertheless, is possible to include the studies completed at the Open University in an academic degree.

### **Implementation of personal study planning and counselling at the Open University**

The Open University study counsellor provides study counselling for approximately 100 students each year. For example in 2007–2008, the PSP form was downloaded from the Open University website over 830 times, and it has been very well received by the students. A PSP appendix, the annual calendar, has been experienced as a good tool for making a concrete schedule for the studies. Indeed, the majority of students getting study counselling for the first time have filled out the PSP form.

The implementation of counselling was also evaluated during the 5Y2D pilot projects. An Open University trainee and a student of education made her final thesis on the topic: "Counselling of Open University Students – Guidance and Counselling Services as Means of Enhancing Study Counselling" (Niemi 2008). The study aimed to chart the sufficiency and functionality of the Open University counselling system and student satisfaction with the present guidance and counselling services.

According to Niemi (2008), 56% of the respondents (n=571) reported that they were degree-oriented. Of these, nearly half were also enrolled as degree students at the University of Kuopio. The younger age groups were more degree-oriented than the older ones, whereas the older age groups emphasised professionally-oriented continuing education. Indeed,

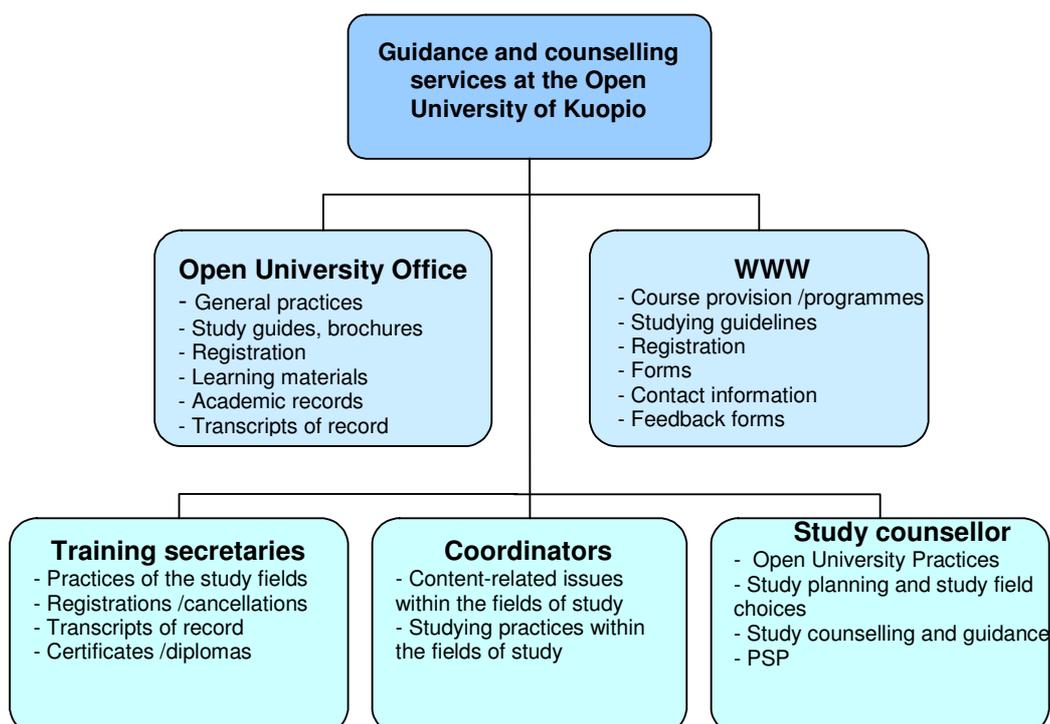
professionally-oriented continuing education was defined as the purpose of studying by 31% of the respondents, whereas 11% defined their purpose of studying as a hobby or as a way of acquiring general education.

The results indicate that older students, students aiming at an academic degree, students with a high number of completed courses, and students who had received individual counselling were the most satisfied with the guidance and counselling services. Students aiming at an academic degree felt that they had received more guidance and counselling than the average student. Furthermore, students aiming at an academic degree and students with a high number of completed courses also knew better than the average student how to obtain guidance and counselling and how the guidance and counselling services work. Students aiming at an academic degree also sought counselling more frequently than the average student. Students with a high number of completed courses, on the other hand, needed counselling more frequently than the average student. Overall, they were the most satisfied with the available guidance and counselling services.

Furthermore, the students generally wished more information on the available guidance and counselling services, that guidance and counselling should be a natural part of the studying and learning processes, that the guidance and counselling services were easily accessible, more, current and sufficient information on the study opportunities and practical matters and individually tailored counselling.

### **Development challenges and development targets for counselling after the pilot projects**

The goal of the pilot projects was to create the foundations for the future evaluation and development of the study counselling processes in a manner which links the guidance and counselling processes to the customer service and marketing processes. The entire staff of the Open University is in charge of the guidance and counselling services: training secretaries, study field coordinators, and the study counsellor (Figure 1).



### *Figure 1. Development of a comprehensive counselling system*

The counselling services and the other customer service and marketing processes provide mutual support for one another and also promote the level of service offered for the students. The acknowledgement of the various processes in the development of the counselling system has been considered most important in order to promote the identification of the students' varying needs for counselling.

#### *Further development of counselling needs identification on the basis of customer group categorisation*

To clarify the counselling system and to better identify the different counselling needs of the students, a categorisation of the customers into three different groups has been taken into use. The students are asked about the purpose of their studies at the Open University. The student registration form enables the students to be divided into three categories:

1. Students aiming at an academic degree
2. Students aiming at professionally-oriented continuing education or professional qualification
3. Students aiming to conduct studies as a hobby or as a means of increasing their general knowledge

Moreover, the development of the PSP practices is linked to this categorisation. The goal is to target the available resources within the counselling system in compliance with the above categorisation. It should, however, be observed that the identified counselling needs can change and that the students may move from one category to another.

The customer group categorisation is also supported by a study addressing the typical Open University students in the early 2000s, conducted at the University of Turku (Rinne, Jauhiainen, Tuomisto, Alho-Malmelin, Halttunen & Lehtonen, 2003). The results indicate the existence of four different "student profiles": students aiming at an academic degree, career-oriented students, students looking for a change, and students for whom studying is a life style.

The study suggests that, from the viewpoint of Open University study planning and counselling, the counselling of degree-seeking and career-oriented students should encourage them to make a PSP either independently or in collaboration with a study counsellor or coordinator. Also students looking for a change and students for whom studying is a life style need support in their choices. Furthermore, students looking for a change also need someone to talk to and discuss their situation, and students for whom studying is a life style potentially need help in limiting the scope of their studies.

#### **Customer group categorisations in the context of the PSP and counselling system development**

It is important for the Open University to identify these student groups. In order to better identify the different needs for counselling, the Open University in autumn 2008 arranged a

workshop in collaboration with the Learning Centre. The goal of this successful workshop was to help the staff realise their role within the counselling system, to learn to apply the available information, guidance and counselling to their central duties, and to learn to identify and consider the students' different needs for counselling.

On the basis of the implemented pilot projects and the training, we have come to the conclusion that the students belonging to group 1 should automatically make a PSP in the future. It is essentially important to develop the PSP practices and the study counselling processes of the Open University, as these will benefit the student when he or she transfers to complete studies at the university. The further the student intends to take his or her studies, the more counselling – even special counselling (pedagogical counselling) – the student will need (Figure 2). Resting on the customer group categorisation, the Open University counselling system could be built on the following model:

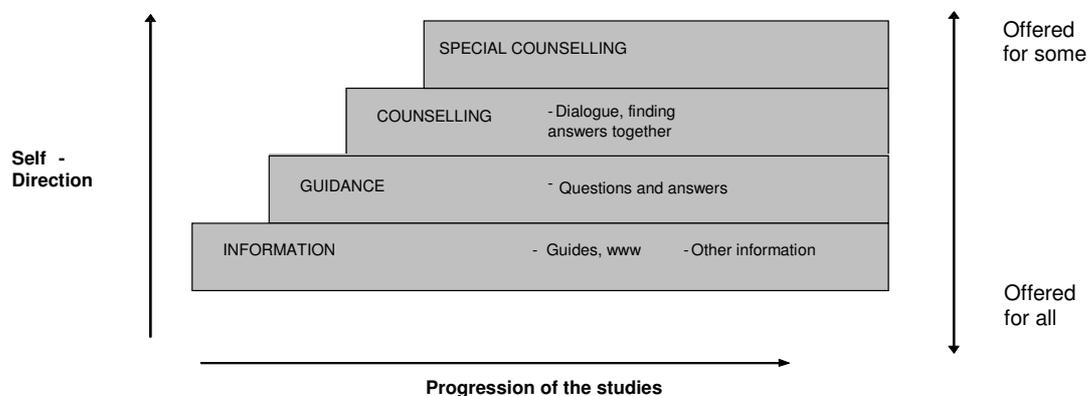


Figure 2. Stages of study counselling (cf. Eriksson & Mikkonen 2003, 39)

The model is based on a definition of counselling stages by different forms of counselling (Eriksson & Mikkonen 2003.) This model considers the students' different needs for counselling and their accumulated skills in self-direction as their studies proceed. The model rests on the idea that the forms of counselling are advertised comprehensively, regardless of via which channel the student chooses to contact the Open University. On the other hand, counselling on specific issues relating to, e.g. the completion of an academic degree need not be offered for all customer groups immediately. Indeed, the questions pertaining to those issues may take very individual forms. Therefore, the Open University should be prepared to offer individually-oriented PSP counselling.

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