

ROYAL HOLLOWAY  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

ADVISERS GUIDE 2006

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## **1. College guidelines on departmental support for students in the form of Academic or Personal Advisers (tutors)**

Departments are expected to provide support to their students in two ways. Firstly, to give advice on academic issues such as the choice of course options or personal development planning and, secondly, to be available to students who are experiencing personal problems which are interfering with their academic work, so that they can direct them to the appropriate College support resource, for example the counselling service or the Health Centre.

Academic departments are free to decide the precise way(s) for students to receive this support, which may differ from department to department, but the following minimum provision is recommended:

- Students should be allocated an adviser; where an adviser is on leave the department should allocate an alternative adviser, while recognising that students may choose who they consult on personal or academic matters;
- For students taking Joint and Combined Honours degrees, there should be an adviser in each department with liaison between the two concerning any difficulties experienced by the student;
- For continuing students, an opportunity for discussion should be provided at least once a term, but the responsibility for meeting their adviser may rest with the student;
- For new students, several opportunities for discussion should be provided and could form part of a more structured introduction to the department, particularly in the first term. Advisers should take a proactive approach to contacting their advisees, although students may feel confident enough not to respond to all opportunities offered;
- Staff should publish office hours when they are available to see advisees;
- Departments should implement, and publish details of, a process for monitoring student progress, which should involve advisers in any decisions about their advisees. This could be achieved by one or more of the following: the appointment of year tutors to liaise with tutors and advisers; an extended role of the academic coordinator; a special review committee; an item on the departmental board agenda.

## **2. Towards a definition of the role**

The precise role of the Academic or Personal Adviser or Tutor will vary from department to department. If you are new to the College, or new to advising, it is therefore recommended that you consult with colleagues as to the exact nature of the duties you will be expected to fulfil. The level of student engagement with advisers will also vary from department to department so again, it is recommended that you consult with colleagues as to the levels of time commitment and emotional investment that are likely to be involved.

In practice, however, advisers in most departments find themselves performing some or all of the following activities:

- Maintaining regular contact with advisees, in person and by e-mail
- Giving basic pastoral support to advisees
- Supporting advisees in personal, academic and career development planning
- Following up advisees who are not making satisfactory progress or have poor attendance records
- Liaising with other members of academic staff involved in the teaching of advisees
- Liaising with members of the Educational Support Office Network over provisions for students with special needs
- Maintaining awareness of other sources of support within College
- Providing information regarding Examinations
- Documenting advisory support for their own or departmental files
- Writing references for current and former advisees

Detailed information to help you with many of these activities is provided on-line by Registry and in person by the members of the Academic Development team. This handbook is not designed to be a substitute for that information, but to offer a general overview of the tasks and challenges commonly facing advisers, together with some practical suggestions for improving your effectiveness in the role.

### **3. First meetings**

New students will be allocated an adviser or tutor at the start of their programme, so plan for an introductory meeting as soon as you receive your list of incoming advisees.

Ideally, this first session should be programmed into induction week. However, if there is not yet a standard system in your department for meeting new advisees, try to arrange to see them briefly as a group during induction week. When you do so, it is worth structuring the discussion to help the group explore any questions or anxieties they may have.

You might ask the students to talk in pairs for a few minutes about their expectations of the programme, and together make a list of any questions about the course or starting university. Pairs can join up into small groups to compare their lists, followed by the group as a whole sharing ideas on

how to resolve any common issues. You could also ask them to recall previous experiences of transitions (such as going to secondary school) and the kinds of strategies that were most successful in helping them to settle in.

Answer any direct questions about the programme, but remember that they may already be feeling overwhelmed with information at this stage, so don't overdo it.

If a group session cannot be scheduled, then send a welcome note or e-mail to each one of your advisees, introducing yourself and inviting them to come and see you individually. Give details of where and when they can find you, and whether you are offering 'drop-in' slots, or whether and how they can sign up for an appointment.

The first meeting with a new advisee is crucial as it sets a precedent for the future conduct of the relationship. It is often useful to start by taking an active interest in the student. Some open-ended questions which may serve as a starting-point include:

- Tell me something about yourself
- How do you feel about being here?
- How does the college differ from your school?
- What do you expect from your experience here?
- What kind of extra-curricular activities do you expect to become involved with?
- Is there anything that you are anxious about with respect to being a student?
- What personal resources do you have that might help you to settle in here and enjoy yourself?
- Have you thought about what kind of career you would like to follow?

It is also important to clarify the purpose of adviser-advisee meetings or tutorials, to set some ground-rules about availability and confidentiality, and to remind students that you are there to offer support for their overall academic and personal development.

Beware of saying, 'if you have any problems, come and see me'. It sounds helpful but can imply that problems are the only passport to a meeting. 'Problems' will be interpreted differently by different individuals. To a student who is dependent on others for support and guidance in all matters a trivial issue can be a problem. Another, who has learned to be independent and proud, would need to be in a desperate situation before they would describe themselves as having a problem.

#### **4. Subsequent meetings**

The College guidelines state that new students should be provided with several opportunities for discussion with their adviser, particularly during the first term, and that advisers should take a pro-active approach to contacting them. It is therefore very important that you schedule

meetings with all new advisees (whether alone or in groups) and that you follow up any non-attendance at these meetings. Research into retention has shown that an early appointment for an informal conversation about how students are settling in will help them make the transition to university more effectively and identify any issues/concerns before these reach crisis point.

For continuing students, an opportunity for discussion should be scheduled at least once a term. It is up to departments to determine how proactive advisers should be in promoting this opportunity, or in following up non-attendees. Although there are arguments in favour of leaving students entirely free to decide whether to attend or not, the disadvantage is that those in greatest need of support or review may fall through the net.

Another advantage of scheduling and promoting periodic progress reviews is that both the adviser and the student can prepare in advance. Where practical, you can ensure that you have copies of the student's most recent assessment results, attendance records, etc, and the student can be encouraged to identify recent successes and areas for improvement, to help focus the discussion. A Personal Development Record (see section 12) or equivalent is likely to provide a useful focus and framework for these regular reviews.

Most programmes will have key times in the year when many students are facing common issues, such as preparation for examinations, and it may be worth arranging an extra group session rather than dealing with queries on an individual basis.

Whatever your departmental policy on scheduled meetings, some students will also wish to see you at other times, and College guidelines state that all advisers should publish office hours when they are available for consultation. In most departments, these office hours are advertised and kept once or twice a week; in others, staff try to maintain a completely 'Open Door' policy.

Both of these approaches have benefits and drawbacks. What is crucial, in either case, is to ensure that students feel cared for as individuals without undermining their sense of personal responsibility. What is equally crucial is to ensure that your own entitlement to a realistic and manageable workload is not eroded.

One of the most important aspects of the role of the adviser, therefore, is to be clear about practical and psychological boundaries. Although there is a duty of care, it is not your job to try to 'solve' all an advisee's problems, nor are you *in loco parentis*. You should be guided by the principle that the primary aim of an adviser is to support advisees in their studies, and the goal of the pastoral care the adviser provides, to help students resolve any personal difficulties which are adversely affecting academic progress. You should also bear in mind that it is not always possible to do this.

Most academic staff contracts require members of staff to become advisers or tutors if so needed and to work such hours as are necessary to carry out the tasks associated with the post. Because of the personal nature of the relationship between an adviser and their advisees, moreover, the adviser is in some senses never 'off duty', and should be prepared to respond to urgent student problems at any reasonable time. This does not mean that you have to be accessible twenty-four hours a day. In practice, you are unlikely to go far wrong if advisees are:

- made aware of routine times when you are in your office
- confident that they can contact you at other times by e-mail or (if more appropriate) office telephone
- notified of arrangements for cover during periods when you are absent
- informed of other services available in the College which back up the advisory system and how to access them in case of emergency, especially 'out of hours' (see section 15)

## **5. Listening and advisory skills**

The setting for an advisory meeting can have a considerable effect on its conduct and outcome. A student is more likely to feel valued and trusting if the space in which the meeting takes place is protected from interruptions at the door or by telephone. As a bare minimum, you should ensure that the door is properly closed; placing a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on it and switching the telephone to 'call divert' mode conveys greater confidentiality and respect. Two chairs of equal height, at an oblique angle to each other, without the obstruction of a desk or plant will further the cause of putting the student at ease. Sitting behind a desk or on chairs of unequal height creates a power relationship that is likely to inhibit self-disclosure.

Some institutions have introduced policies to restrict one-to-one meetings, to avoid accusations of impropriety on either side. At Royal Holloway, this is not usually considered necessary, but you may wish to take a few sensible precautions against such accusations, including:

- scheduling meetings only during the working week and in formal settings
- trying to keep meetings to a time when adjoining offices are occupied
- keeping proper records of meetings
- preventing students from over-extending meetings or arranging an excessive number of meetings

If you do develop concerns about a particular situation, discuss them with colleagues and identify practical solutions. For instance you could use a room with a glass panel in or next to the door, or arrange for another member of staff to remain nearby.

Unless a student is obviously distressed, it is useful to begin a meeting by spending a few minutes jointly setting an informal agenda. It's equally

important to allow them enough time to explore the issues, whether academic or personal, for themselves and develop their own ideas about what to do.

Two of the most important skills needed for adviser-advisee meetings are listening and questioning. The difficulty is that if you see yourself exclusively or primarily as a source of information and advice, you may be tempted to jump in too soon and just tell the student how you think they should act. Try to avoid this. Instead, attend closely to words and body language, and hold back comments or questions until the student has had time to say what is on their mind.

After they've finished speaking, it can be helpful to reflect back what you think they've said, to reassure them that you have been listening attentively and to allow them to correct any misunderstandings. This is particularly important if the student's first language is not English. You might also ask one or two questions to open up the discussion and assist them in clarifying the underlying issues. Examples might include:

- How is the programme/course going?
- How do you get on with the other students?
- How do you feel about what is happening?
- What are the options for you?
- Tell me more about...
- What would you need to happen to make you feel better about...?
- What would you like to change?

Although 'Why' questions are open-ended it is wise to use them sparingly because they can be interpreted as persecutory.

Towards the end of the discussion, it can be helpful to agree jointly some realistic action points and, if appropriate, a time for a further meeting to follow up on progress. Again, with non-native English speakers it is worth asking the student to explain or summarise in their own words what has been agreed to make sure that the important points have been understood. It is not uncommon for students who do not have a strong grasp of English to say that they have understood when in fact they have not.

## **6. Coping with confrontation**

Some advisees may have genuine problems with taking responsibility, and advisers should be clear about the gradually escalating confrontations that can result from these problems. Other advisees remain impervious to 'ordinary' feedback and need to be confronted quite bluntly with reality. In both cases, some of the following ideas may be helpful:

- *Check the facts*

"Emma, your Politics lecturer tells me you were unacceptably rude in the last session. I would like to know your version of events". In an instance

where decisions may be appealed against, check the relevant Academic Regulations and make sure procedures are followed to the letter. If necessary, consult others about the correct procedures.

- *Stick with the facts*

Do not get involved in arguments. As an adviser you do not have to justify decisions taken by committees, boards, etc. Your job as a representative of your department and of the College is simply to explain in so far as you are able, and not to defend.

- *Continue to stick with the facts*

Where a decision has been taken to suspend a student, or require withdrawal, be firm and clear. Advisees should be informed of the appeal procedures outlined in the relevant Academic Regulations, told whether in the adviser's view there are any grounds for appeal, and told whether an appeal has any realistic chance of success. They should be encouraged to take a week to get over their anger and disappointment, and to consult other people, before taking any decision to appeal.

- *Write down the facts*

Documenting such decisions and conversations is important and notes should be made up at the time; some record of the meeting should be included in your files. It is often helpful to follow up with a letter or e-mail summarizing what has been said.

## **7. Common concerns**

Apart from improving your advisory 'technique', it is helpful to think about the kinds of issues that students are likely to present. These fall into a number of basic categories:

*Problems with academic work* might include

- Worries about programme choice. It is very common for new students to wonder whether they are on the right programme. This may be overcome as they settle down gradually, or with the assistance of a specialist adviser at the Careers Service, to whom you could refer them. However, it may be related to other anxieties, so be alert to the possibility of underlying problems that have nothing to do with careers or subjects.
- Difficulties with particular courses, modules or blocks. Try to encourage them to discuss this with the course leader first; if they are reluctant to do so for any reason, talk through the issues with them, but avoid inviting criticism of professional colleagues. Instead, help them to identify the underlying problem (e.g. inappropriate module choice, specific academic difficulty, personality clash with staff or students) and to find possible solutions for themselves.

- Difficulties with general academic skills, such as writing essays or coping with examinations. As well as offering direct support to the student, if appropriate, you could refer them to departmental handbooks and to relevant 'self-help' texts such as Creme and Lea, *Writing at University* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), or encourage them to attend some of the generic study skills seminars organized by the Educational Support Office. If you suspect a student may have dyslexia or another specific learning difficulty, advise them to contact the Educational Support Office for an expert assessment. Students for whom English is a second language should be referred to the Language Centre (see section 10) which offers a comprehensive range of academic and study skills courses tailored to the needs of speakers of English as a foreign language.
- Time management. Students who have been used to reminders from parents or teachers at every stage of their school career can find it hard to manage multiple deadlines on their own. Recommend that they attend the Educational Support Office workshop on time management, and help them to draw up a sensible work-plan at the beginning of every term, if necessary, but avoid taking on a 'parental' role or nagging them.
- Difficulties with other students, perhaps arising from group projects. Avoid taking sides, but help them to work towards a compromise. Suggest that they consult guidelines on group working such as those published by the School of Management. As with other transferable skills, the ability to work well in groups requires practice and some support.

*Financial difficulties* are increasingly common and can have a cumulative effect on students' work, with stress and anxiety sometimes combining with too many hours of part-time work to cause academic under-achievement or failure.

Apart from just offering a sympathetic ear, encourage them to think about whether they could reduce some kinds of spending. Many first-year students, in particular, find it hard to get a balance between study and fun at first. Students in serious difficulty should be referred to Student Services for relevant advice and possible financial assistance through College or national channels. The Student Financial Adviser offers counselling on budgeting and debt repayment.

#### *Personal problems*

It is natural that some students will see you as their first port of call in the event of personal difficulties. However, whilst you should expect to give guidance on certain matters, particularly if they have an impact on academic performance or choices, do not try to take on the role of a personal counsellor. Few students are in reality unaware of the various options in a difficult situation, and a seemingly ingenuous appeal for help may in fact be an attempt to persuade someone to "tell them what to do". Where it is not, advisers who perceive themselves as counsellors nonetheless risk suggesting "solutions" that may be counter-productive or subsequently disowned by the student.

When an advisee comes to you with a serious personal problem, listen sensitively to what they are telling you, but avoid the temptation to offer well intentioned but amateur advice. Use open questions to help the student clarify the issues in their own mind, and encourage them to make contact with the appropriate central or external service. This encouragement should be especially strong if they:

- Admit to suicidal thoughts
- Are suffering from abuse or harassment
- Are encountering difficulties due to a disability or special need

Sometimes, a student will not raise a problem directly even though they may wish to talk about it. They may open an interview by presenting a different, safer issue, to test the water. The adviser therefore needs to keep an open mind as to whether the first issue presented is the most important one and be alert to the hidden agenda. Other forms of behaviour that may mask an underlying problem include the following:

- Non-attendance
- Missed deadlines
- Noticeable change in physical appearance
- Tearfulness
- Reticence in tutorials or seminars
- Isolation (of a hitherto sociable person)
- Excessive attention-seeking
- Absent-mindedness

If you observe any of these forms of behaviour in a marked degree, you may wish to consult with colleagues in your department or the Counselling Service before posing direct questions to the student.

## **8. Specialist advice and referrals**

There are a number of reasons why you might wish to refer an advisee on to professional counsellors, many of which are explored in the Counselling Service's on-line presentation for new advisers, 'Helping Students in Distress'. These include limiting possible dependency by the advisee, and avoiding over-exposure to difficult material, such as suicide threats or accounts of sexual abuse.

If you are in any doubt as to whether to refer an advisee, suspect that an advisee may be at risk from themselves or others, or would like to discuss an issue that is affecting an advisee, you should not hesitate to contact the Counselling Service.

The Counselling Service also offers resources and general advice to staff on:

- Dealing with psychological emergencies
- Helping students undergoing bereavement
- Helping students with eating problems

- Student mental health
- Taking reports of rape and sexual assault

These are accessible from the "Services for Departments and Staff" page of the Student Counselling Service website (see section 14).

It is worth thinking in advance about how you would introduce the suggestion that the student might speak to someone other than yourself. It is important that they don't feel you are just trying to offload them and their problems, but that you are genuinely concerned to ensure that they get the most appropriate support.

The most important aspects of referral, therefore, are to ensure that an advisee knows:

- Why they are being referred to someone else;
- What they can expect from the person or agency to whom they are being referred;
- That their relationship with you will continue.

It is usually best not to make the initial contact with a third party on a student's behalf, and certainly not without their permission. However, if you are worried that they may avoid seeking the necessary professional help, and the matter seems urgent, offer the appropriate details and let them use your telephone during your meeting. If that is not possible, then give them the information they need, in writing, to enable to do so later.

In the event that you find yourself in a particularly difficult or disruptive situation, the guidelines below may be of some assistance.

- If someone is very upset or angry, try to stay calm yourself. Let them finish what they are saying so you can understand what it is that they want. Ask them calmly to explain the bits you don't understand. Keep judgements to yourself.
- Acknowledge their emotion directly, e.g. "I can see how upset/angry you are and I would like to try to help you".
- Bear in mind that anger is extremely unlikely to be personal to you, but will be an accumulation of events and pressures.
- If the student is very upset, offer them a cup of tea or coffee, which will also give you time to decide the best way forward.
- If you don't have the time to deal with the situation properly then it is better to say so, e.g. "I understand what you want but I'm due in a meeting shortly and I want to make sure I give you the time you need – what time can you come back this afternoon?"
- If you don't know how to help be honest about it, e.g. "I understand what you want but I'm not sure who can provide that for you. Can you give me some time to make some calls to establish where you can get the help you need? I will keep your personal details confidential."

Do not expect to receive much, if any, feedback about the outcome of a referral. Other professionals may be bound by confidentiality rules, although members of staff in certain central college services (including

Counselling) are encouraged to allay advisers' fears by notifying them whether a student has attended an appointment, whether they are continuing treatment, and whether any further action or support is required from the adviser. It is worth checking that the student is aware of the limits of this kind of feedback, in case they are anxious about it or alternatively that they would prefer you to know exactly what is happening and might automatically assume that you will be kept up to date by someone else. Ask them to let you know how they get on and to come back to you if there are any problems or delays.

## **9. Students with disabilities and special educational needs**

It is particularly important to ensure that students with disabilities and special educational needs such as dyslexia feel confident about meeting their adviser to explore future needs and any adjustments that may be necessary, as well as discussing their progress on a regular basis.

The Educational Support Office website provides a number of general guidance sheets on supporting students with different kinds of disabilities, as well as a series of 'Frequently Asked Questions', the most relevant of which are reproduced in modified form below. If you need help or advice in understanding and assisting individual students, you can contact the Senior Educational Support Officer directly.

*A student has disclosed to me that they have a special need and I have been told that I need to send them to the Educational Support Office to register. What exactly does this entail for the student?*

All that this means is that the student should book an appointment to talk to the Senior Educational Support Officer (SESO) about their condition or difficulty and the ways in which the Educational Support Office might be able to help them. The appointment takes between 10 and 15 minutes and entails the SESO taking the student's contact details, getting them to fill out a Support Questionnaire and discussing any extra funding available to them. When the student has submitted evidence of the special need (e.g. a recent letter from their GP, or an Educational Psychologist Assessment carried out when they were 16 years old or older), the information they have disclosed on the questionnaire will be put into a Support Memo and sent to the departmental special needs co-ordinator, the 'ESO Network Member', who then cascades the information to relevant members of academic and administrative staff.

*If a student needs special examination arrangements, what do I need to advise them to do?*

They will need to have registered with the Educational Support Office (ESO) and have provided documentation with explicit recommendations about examination arrangements signed by a qualified professional (e.g. GP, Psychiatrist, or Educational Psychologist). They will need to fill in a Special Examination Arrangements Application Form and return it to the ESO. The ESO then checks the supporting evidence and communicates

their needs to the department, the Exams Office and the Senior Assistant Registrar. Once the College Board of Examiners Executive Committee has authorised the arrangements, the Exams Office will officially inform the student a couple of months before the end-of-year exam period. If the student has what would be considered a 'stable' condition (e.g. dyslexia) they will not generally have to reapply again, but will be automatically entitled to the same arrangements that were made for them the year before (unless their needs have changed, they have returned from a third year abroad or an interrupted third year, or they have moved from an undergraduate to a postgraduate programme). If they have what would be considered a 'fluctuating' condition, e.g. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome or panic attacks, they will need to reapply every year, submitting recent evidence.

*What can I do if I think a student may have dyslexia?*

Please refer them to the ESO as in question one. The ESO has computerised screening programme called Quicksan that consists of a series of questions and takes between 10 and 20 minutes for a student to complete. The report that is printed out after the screening will identify the student's preferred learning style, i.e. whether they learn better through visual, auditory or kinaesthetic input. The report also tells the student whether their answers contain indicators associated with dyslexia. The student will discuss the findings with one of the ESO team and, depending on the number of 'indicators associated with dyslexia' they may be referred on to an Educational Psychologist for a formal assessment or they may simply be offered additional study skills support, both of which the ESO will co-ordinate.

*What is SENDA?*

SENDA stands for Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 and is Part 4 of the main Disability Discrimination Act 1995. It requires educational institutions to ensure they are not treating disabled students less favourably and to make reasonable adjustments to their teaching practices, institutional policies and physical access in order to enable students with disabilities to fulfil their potential.

*I have heard different rumours about our legal responsibility with regards to confidentiality and disclosure. Please can you explain the situation?*

If a student has disclosed their special need to any employee of Royal Holloway (including temporary and cleaning staff), the University is deemed to know and make reasonable adjustments for that student. The blue 'Disability and SENDA - What You Need to Know' booklet has been distributed to all staff and continues to be given out at every College Staff Induction session. This booklet outlines some disability issues and the need for all members of staff to encourage students who have disclosed special needs to register with the ESO (if the students have not already done so). If a student does not want to register with the ESO, the staff member needs to point out that very few specific adjustments can be made without 'official' disclosure. If the student persists in refusing to

register, the staff member should ask them to sign and date a Disclosure Agreement Form (contact the ESO for a copy). This form indicates that the student is aware of the consequences of non-disclosure, i.e. that they realise few adjustments can be made without formally declaring their special need to the ESO. You should also keep a written record for your own files documenting the dates and contents of all conversations you have had with the student on this subject. If you are in any doubt about a specific student, please do not hesitate to contact the ESO; you do not need to disclose the student's name to the ESO.

*Does supporting students with special needs lead to extra financial and time commitments from staff and departmental budgets?*

Most students who are UK residents have extra funding from their LEA (to cover academic support, equipment, software, study helpers etc) and some have funding from Social Services (for personal care support such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry). Non-UK residents are able to apply to a small College-based fund and to the E.S.O. directly for assistance in obtaining a Student Helper. These Student Helpers can not only be used to support the disabled student, they can also be made available to assist departments with tasks such as the transcription of videos for deaf students and the translation of departmental handbooks into Braille. However, often disabled students will still need additional staff time and effort (e.g. extra tutorial time or time taken to create their exam scripts in larger print).

## **10. International students**

Students who come from non-British cultural backgrounds can experience all the problems commonly encountered by 'home' students and described in section 7. However, they may need clearer explanations as to the role and availability of their adviser than their British peers. They may also require a little extra attention to assist them in adjusting to College life, or have additional concerns to which the adviser should be alert. Some of these concerns might include:

- Homesickness
- Secondment from employment
- Family expectations
- Study difficulties
- Financial problems
- Religious differences
- War or civil unrest in the student's home country
- Disappointment
- Cultural differences in the relationship with the advisers

Most advisers respect the autonomy of individuals and their right to pursue their studies without the help or involvement of their adviser. It is worth remembering, though, that some overseas students' reluctance to consult their adviser, or to notify them of adverse personal circumstances, can be due to under-confidence or embarrassment, rather than a desire

for independence. Where this appears to be the case, advisers need to think carefully about non-intrusive ways of approaching students who are falling behind with their studies, or be more proactive in scheduling 'regular' appointments than they might be with 'home' students.

There is a Student Support Officer at the college with special responsibility for international students, including counselling them on financial issues. She is also happy to talk to staff about the practical arrangements that can be made for overseas advisees. All student queries related to visas and immigration, however, should be referred directly to her, as the complex and changeable nature of legislation in this area requires specialist interpretation.

The Language Centre runs in-session English language support courses which are aimed at developing specific academic and language skills. A significant number of courses focus specifically on academic writing skills and provide systematic training in areas such as referencing, the use of multiple sources and strategies for avoiding plagiarism. In addition to referring students to the Language Centre, Personal Advisors can contact the Language Centre directly for advice on possible language learning materials which students can use independently. To date, the Language Centre has also co-ordinated a college-wide 'study buddy' scheme to provide peer-to-peer support for overseas students as well as anyone on campus interested in learning a foreign language and/or learning about a foreign culture.

Both the staff of the Language Centre and the staff of the Education and International Liaison Office may be able to answer queries from advisers relating to specific cultural backgrounds or expectations. The chaplains can provide information about religious beliefs and festivals, as well as putting students in touch with different religious communities.

## **11. Written records and confidentiality**

It is helpful to take a few minutes at the end of an adviser-advisee meeting to review what has been discussed and confirm any actions that have been agreed. For example, a student might be asked to focus on improving their essay-writing skills, or to keep a diary for a week to help with time management.

Depending on your departmental systems, you may be expected to record this, with a copy for the student and another for your own or departmental files. If this is the case, you should ensure that your summary of the encounter is accurate and relevant, and that opinions are clearly differentiated from facts. Remember that a student has a right to request to see any information kept on file about them, and that in the event of a dispute all records and emails can be called for use in evidence. If it is not the case, and there is no formal advisory record system in use in your department, you should still encourage the student to keep their own written notes of the agreed action points.

Any recording system, of course, raises the question of confidentiality. The need for clarity around information about disability was discussed in section 9. Similar principles should apply to any other information disclosed in tutorials (e.g. about domestic problems, or bereavement). If it may affect the student's ability to fulfil the demands of their course, encourage them to let relevant staff know about it or ask if they would like you to do this on their behalf, but don't do so without explicit permission. Whatever is agreed about disclosure to staff, you should of course never discuss information revealed in the course of an adviser-advisee meeting with other students.

Make sure that the student is also aware that they can submit notification to the Chair of the Sub-Board of Examiners if their situation has a substantial impact on any aspect of their work. Where a student's performance appears to have been adversely affected by circumstances beyond their control, such as serious illness or bereavement, the Sub-Board may take this into consideration when making decisions on progression. However, examiners can only consider circumstances of which they have been informed, in writing, in advance, by the student, and of which there is medical or other documentary evidence. A full guide to this procedure is contained in the 'Instructions to Candidates' published annually by Registry.

You should not feel obliged to keep confidential any information that might compromise your own position (for instance if a student is telling you about a serious breach or intended breach of the law, or of college regulations) and should make this clear if such a situation arises.

The other time when confidentiality may with impunity be over-ridden is where there is a genuine concern for the student's safety (for instance when they have expressed suicidal feelings) requiring notification of their GP or other specialist help.

Thornier situations may arise where an advisee requests confidentiality in the course of a revelation about the conduct of another member of academic staff, whether this involves unprofessional comments, actions, or a personal relationship with a student, and you might want to consider in advance how you would respond to such a situation. If you find *yourself* in a personal relationship with a student, you have a duty of disclosure as stipulated in the College's 'Guidelines on Personal Relationships between Staff, Students and Others', which are available on the Campus Intranet and cover business connections as well as friendships and intimate relationships.

Exceptionally, you may be asked for information by parents or other relatives of an advisee. Should this occur, you should consult the College's codes on 'Handling Students' Personal Data' and 'Parental Contact', which are, likewise, available on the Campus Intranet.

## **12. Personal and career development planning**

The College's P.D.P. website provides full information on Personal Development Planning as it is defined by the Quality Assurance Agency, including the advice that academic staff acting in the capacity of personal advisors should:

- familiarize themselves with the processes involved in structured development planning by reading the 'For Students' section of the site;
- be prepared to discuss learning, achievement and employment goals with each of their advisees on request at least once a year, and make it clear to all advisees that this is the case;
- be prepared to read and discuss completed Personal Development Records with each of their advisees on request at least once a year, and make it clear to all advisees that this is the case.

If you feel the generic Personal Development Record is too cumbersome for your students, and there is no equivalent in your department, you might consider using a simple end-of-year review form instead (see the end of this guide for one example). Such forms help focus adviser-advisee meetings and provide a springboard for the discussion of future plans.

It is important that you encourage your advisees to explore the on-line resources offered by the Careers Service, and to visit the Careers Centre itself, at an early stage. However, you should not merely 'offload' students on to a professional careers counsellor, or shy away from careers conversations altogether. Often, your advisees will not expect you to have expert answers to their queries: what they really want is a chance to talk through their abilities, interests, and possibilities.

You can aid this kind of dialogue by asking general questions about a student's work or academic progress, for instance:

- Which assignments have most challenged you recently? Least challenged you? Why?
- What part of your course has been most valuable to you this year?
- If you asked three of your fellow-students to give feedback on your greatest strengths, what would they say?
- If you could give yourself the perfect assignment, what would it be?

At the very least, you should find out the name of the Careers Liaison Tutor in your department and ensure that they inform you of any discipline-related careers events your advisees might attend.

## **13. Writing references**

As an adviser, you are likely to be asked to provide references for current and former advisees by both employers and other academic institutions.

The College Secretary has provided a 'Guidance Note' on writing references, available via the Campus intranet, and the following points of good practice may also ease the process.

You should:

- explain to advisees how you handle reference requests and what you might reasonably expect from them (advance warning, copies of job advertisements or person specifications, course details etc)
- encourage students to keep and pass on to you an up-to-date CV
- consider having your own system for noting individual students' achievements, interests and behaviour
- respond to requests for references as quickly as possible
- provide references in the format requested by the employer, admissions tutor or equivalent
- try to substantiate all statements with hard evidence
- avoid divulging information about medical conditions (whether past or present) or personal circumstances without the student's explicit consent
- be clear when stating an opinion rather than facts – use phrases such as 'it is my belief' or 'to the best of my knowledge' if in any doubt
- avoid ambiguous, equivocal or 'coded' comments
- think carefully about the level of detail that is likely to be required by the recipient – academic institutions and the security services generally expect far more information than the average corporate employer, who may primarily want confirmation of the facts given in the student's application
- bear in mind that the features which are most important to you in assessing a student, such as academic potential, may not hold the same significance for an employer
- avoid writing anything you would not want the student to see
- emphasize strengths rather than weaknesses
- give Finalists, in particular, plenty of notice of upcoming periods of leave and suggest alternative academic referees
- consider placing notes from advisory meetings and previous references in the care of a colleague or on a staff shared drive where they can be accessed in your absence

If you believe you have cause to refuse to write even a basic factual reference for an advisee, you should discuss the matter with your Head of School or Department before notifying the student. If you are in doubt as to the legal implications or desirability of disclosing that the student is (or was) in bad standing with the College, e.g. for disciplinary or financial reasons, you should consult the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Officer.

## 14. Useful contacts

### Academic Appeals

See *Academic Development*

### Academic Development

Website: [http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic\\_development/Index.html](http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic_development/Index.html)

E-mail: [academic-development-office@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:academic-development-office@rhul.ac.uk).

### Academic Regulations

See *Academic Development*

### Accommodation

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/for-students/accommodation.html>

E-mail: [accommodation@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:accommodation@rhul.ac.uk)

Office: FW 139

Enquiries (undergraduate): 01784 443349 or 01784 443358

Enquiries (postgraduate): 01784 414077

### Careers Service

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/careers>

E-mail: [careers@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:careers@rhul.ac.uk)

Centre: Ground floor, Horton Building

Enquiries: 01784 443073

### Chaplaincy

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Chaplaincy/Index.html>

E-mail: [chaplaincy@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:chaplaincy@rhul.ac.uk)

Office: FW 169

Enquiries: 01784 443950

### Childcare

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/for-students/student-support/childcare.html>

And see also *Student Support*

### **Counselling**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/counselling>

E-mail: [counselling@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:counselling@rhul.ac.uk)

Office: FW 169

Enquiries: 01784 443128

### **Disability and special educational needs**

See *Educational Support*

### **Educational Support**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/for-students/Disabled-Students>

E-mail: [educational-support@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:educational-support@rhul.ac.uk)

Office: FW 151

Enquiries: 01784 443966

### **Education and International Liaison Office**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/eilo>

E-mail: [liaison-office@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:liaison-office@rhul.ac.uk)

### **Examinations**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/registry/Examinations/index.html>

E-mail: [examinations@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:examinations@rhul.ac.uk)

### **Financial advice**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/For-Students/student-support/financial-counselling>

And see also *Student Support*

### **Health Centre**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/health-centre>

Location: FE1

Appointments: 01784 443131

### **International Student Support**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/For-Students/Student-Support/supportofficer.html>

And see also *Student Support*

### **Language Centre**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Language-Centre>

E-mail: [language-centre@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:language-centre@rhul.ac.uk)

Office: IN009

Enquiries: 1784 443829

### **Mature student support**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/for-students/student-support/mature-students.html>

And see also *Student support*

### **Medical**

See *Heath Centre*

### **Personal Development Planning**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/pdp>

See *Heath Centre*

### **Student support**

Website: <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/for-students/student-support>

Office: FW 151

Student support officer: 01784 443663

E-mail: [d.keable@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:d.keable@rhul.ac.uk)

Student financial adviser: 01784 414633

E-mail: [charmaine.valente@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:charmaine.valente@rhul.ac.uk)

### **Study skills**

See *Educational Support*

## 15. Emergency contacts

**College security:** 01784 443063

**Emergency services:** 999

**Out of hours GP:** 01753 865773

**Samaritans:** 08457 90 90 90

## 16. Sample end of year review form

### ROYAL HOLLOWAY DRAMA DEPARTMENT ADVISEE REVIEW

This form is to be completed and submitted to your advisor in the summer term. It is an opportunity to reflect on the activities of the year and will also prove to be a useful resource when you are applying for jobs and your advisor is writing references.

Name:

Year:

Courses undertaken:

Extra curricular activities undertaken:

Do you feel that you achieved what you set out to do this year?

Were there any specific factors that helped or hindered your progress?

What do you feel were your strengths this year?

What would you like to improve on?

Have there been any other surprises/highlights/points of learning that you would like to comment on?

Advisor's comments: