

Case studies: handout

The role of the Tutor is primarily to act as a first source of advice and support for students in their interactions with University and College authorities, and to provide a friendly, familiar and helpful face in times of difficulty. The role is very often one of triage: it involves assessing the nature of a problem and directing the student to the most appropriate source of professional help, whether on finances or mental health or a myriad other topics.

The case studies in this handout indicate something of the range of issues that Tutors may encounter. **Please quickly read through all case studies before the training day.**

During the training day, we will discuss a selection of case studies in small groups and in plenary, with a panel of experienced Senior Tutors. **Please ensure that, on the day, you are able to:**

- access this handout,
- access [this link to further guidance](#), for quick reference while you review selected case studies during the training day.

Case studies session 1: Welfare and academic issues for undergraduate and postgraduate students

Instructions for small-group discussions

Before beginning your small-group discussions, please

- briefly introduce yourself (name and College)
- agree an informal 'chair' for the session, who will keep an eye on time and ensure that the small group has time to discuss the specified case studies and the three questions below
- agree who will briefly (up to two minutes) summarise your discussions to the plenary, if invited to do so by the Senior Tutors facilitating plenary discussions

When discussing case studies in small groups, please consider these questions:

1. What are the most important issues raised by this case study?
2. What action might you take as a Tutor?
3. What might be the impact of these actions on the student(s)?

Case Study 1

An email from your College Tutorial Office

Dear Pat,

Just had call from hysterical parents about their daughter, Rachel Roberts. They are concerned that they had not heard from her since the beginning of term and then had a phone call yesterday in which she broke down and told them just how concerned she was about her second-year studies. They wanted to speak with you directly in your capacity as her Tutor. They can be reached on xxxx any time (for the father) but only after 6.00 pm for the mother who has a full-time job.

Good luck,

Janet

Case Study 2

An email from a student's DoS

Dear Pat,

Below is an email that one of my supervisors has sent me about Bobby. I haven't seen Bobby for months, so please do something about it.

Thanks

Jan

Dear Jan

Would it be possible to reschedule tomorrow's 'Essay Paper' supervision? The reason is that, against expectation, the show in which I am playing the lead has been taking up every second of my days. I wish it were otherwise because I am committed to my subject, but I committed to this play almost a

year ago and feel I cannot drop out at this point. It would be absolutely wonderful if the supervision could be held either in week 2 or after our week 3 supervision.

I know I am not giving a very good impression with this conduct, especially after my disappointing results last year, and I am really torn by the whole thing. However, I have spoken to my theatre director and she has agreed to give me the time to do the work for my supervision on Thursday. By the by, what room are we to have the supervision in?

I hope this is alright; I am really sorry but look forward to dedicating my time to philosophy after the play finishes on Saturday! It was wonderful speaking to you. You are inspiring and have given me back the motivation to engage in academic work.

Many thanks, Bobby

Case Study 3

M is a good, reliable second-year student who has never caused concerns. After submitting the required 2 pieces of coursework (two extended essays and a dissertation) and taking 1 of their 2 exams, M requests to see their tutor urgently, and appears to be on the verge of a nervous collapse. After trying to calm M down, it is evident to you that they are not going to sit their second exam the following day.

So M goes home without taking exam no. 2, and when the results appear it emerges that M has been awarded a first-class mark in the one paper they sat and in every item of their coursework, but 0 in exam no. 2, with the result that their overall class is a low 2:2.

How do you proceed?

Case Study 4

P is a very good final-year student, with a history of getting first-class results. In their final year, they have a series of mishaps — a bereavement followed by a late diagnosis of glandular fever followed by a painful split-up with their partner. At their finals, P is awarded a good 2:1, with all their marks being in the 67-69 region. P is upset and wonders if there is anything that can be done.

Q is a similarly good final-year student, also with a history of getting first-class results. In their final year, their parents split up while they are writing their dissertation. Q is awarded low first-class results in all their exams, but a 2:2 in their dissertation and an overall 2:1. Q is upset by this result and wonders if there's anything that can be done.

Case Study 5

Rosie is a second-year student with a good record, but who tends to be very nervous at exams. This year she has had a series of personal issues — she has battled through them valiantly; but in the Easter term, with the approaching of the exam season, her mental health is deteriorating. She has reasonable supervision reports that highlight both her difficulties and her honest attempts to overcome them. This week Rosie has had two panic attacks. She has seen her GP and has just been put on medication, and unsurprisingly this is, for the time being, adding to her problems. How do you proceed?

Case Study 6

Last night Jo was rushed to Accident and Emergency at the local hospital having reported taking an overdose. Today, Jo has been discharged and is back in College. Jo's supervisor has noted that they are making no progress and has recommended an application for intermission. Jo does not wish to apply for intermission since they do not wish to go home. Jo is also adamant that the tutor should not contact their parents as they are 'scared' of them.

What factors should be taken into consideration?

Case studies session 2: Welfare & finance for undergraduate and postgraduate students

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When discussing case studies in small groups, please consider these questions:

4. What are the most important issues raised by this case study?
5. What action might you take as a Tutor?
6. What might be the impact of these actions on the student(s)?

Case Study 1

An email from an overseas PhD student in your college

Dear Dr Smith,

I arrived in Cambridge two weeks ago. I am studying for a PhD in Economics. My supervisor in the department told me I must contact you, because College will pay my bills. My father is in the clothing business, but his company has collapsed suddenly, and he does not have enough money for me to stay here. I am afraid I will lose my UK visa. It is my life dream to come to Cambridge and I have worked extremely hard to get my qualifications and to learn good English. I am very glad College will look after me.

Yours sincerely,

Sim

Case Study 2

Dear Dr Smith,

I have a problem with my rent because I am a Part III student and I was told by my supervisor that I needed to come back a month early to work on my project. My student loan doesn't come through until October and anyway it won't cover this extra expense. I think that the College really needs to help in situations like this. I am in private accommodation.

Yours sincerely,

Jamie

Case Study 3

Dear Dr Smith,

I'm sorry to get in touch with you and the answer to this is probably 'no', but I was wondering if the College has a fund to cover bus fares?

All best,

Sami

Case Study 4

From a UK undergraduate at your College

Dear Dr Smith,

I'm really sorry to contact you like this but I don't think I'm going to be able to pay my College bill at the start of Lent Term. Just before Christmas my parents told me that they are getting divorced, and my father says he won't contribute any more to my education. Since my mother's job is very badly paid, I don't think she'll be able to afford it, especially because my younger brother is still at school. What should I do? Should I take the rest of the year out and try to earn enough money to pay for next year?

Thank you,

Lucy

Case studies session 3: Complaints for undergraduate and postgraduate students

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When discussing case studies in small groups, please consider these questions:

7. What are the most important issues raised by this case study?
8. What action might you take as a Tutor?
9. What might be the impact of these actions on the student(s)?

Case Study 1

A student comes to you explaining that they do not feel comfortable within College or their Department because they feel people react differently to them because they are from China. A professor at the department made a comment the other day that the student will work hard and cause no trouble because they are Chinese. The student wants to know how this can be reported.

Case Study 2

Stage 1:

Simon is the Tutor for all the first-year History students in his college. In February, Christine sees him in a state of great distress, saying that 'something weird' had happened with her supervision partner Richard. He arrived in her room unexpectedly one night and was trying to kiss her and touch her. She tried to move away from him, but he became quite physically forceful, and after some time she gave him a condom and they started to have sex. She then tried to move away from him, but he insisted on continuing. What should Simon do?

Stage 2:

Richard consistently denied Christine's accusation, and in May told his Director of Studies that he wished to leave Cambridge because it was too stressful to feel that everybody regarded him as a rapist.

What should Simon advise the Director of Studies to do?

Case Study 3

You are the Tutor for second year HSPS students. Becky comes to see you to report her distress at a remark that a Professor at another College had made to her in a supervision in his College study when she asked about a book he had written. He had offered to lend her the book and given her the choice of 'hard or floppy', holding hardback and paperback editions in each hand. Becky reports that David, a male student from Bill's college, also felt the comment was inappropriate; two other students in the room had noticed nothing. What should you do?

Case Study 4

Email from one of your tutorial students:

Dear Dr Jones,

I am worried for my friend Sue (staircase H) came to my room at 3am sobbing and saying that she had been raped by Brian (also staircase H). She told me not to tell anyone, but she has asked if she can stay in my room for next week because doesn't feel safe. This is not right, she hasn't done anything wrong. Please can you make Brian move so she can go back to her room, also she doesn't know I'm telling you this so you cannot mention it to her, she is feeling very ashamed and worried that if anyone finds out then Brian will take revenge on her.

Thank you so much,

Jo

Case study 5

A student informs their undergraduate supervisor that they have a specific learning difficulty but that they don't want to inform the University or anyone else in the College because they want the same treatment as everyone else.

The supervisor agrees not to tell anyone, the student asks whether the supervisor can give them extensions for their supervision essay; but the supervisor explains that the student would need to disclose their disability to the ADRC so they could make recommendations for adjustments.

The student waits until the end of the year and then tells you they are unhappy because they have done poorly in that paper because no reasonable adjustments were made to the supervision, even though they informed the supervisor.

What advice do you offer to this student?

Case Study 6

A student has just completed their three-year degree with a 2.2 class in each part of the Tripos. The student received a diagnosis of dyslexia just before receiving their results, and have emailed you because they want to know whether they should submit an examination review request. What do you advise the student? Would your advice change, if they received the diagnosis during Lent Term? Would your advice change if the student contacted you three months after graduating?

Case studies session 4: Specialist services (University Counselling Service, Accessibility & Disability Resource Service, Student Union Advisory Service, Personalised Eating Disorder Service) for all students

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When discussing case studies in small groups, please consider these questions:

10. What are the most important issues raised by this case study?
11. What action might you take as a Tutor?
12. What might be the impact of these actions on the student(s)?

Case Study 1

N is a fresher with a disability: a condition of their joints makes it impossible for N to stay seated for more than 30-40 minutes at a time, and both writing longhand and typing cause them serious exhaustion. You already know that in N's subject the first-year students sit 6 exams, often two in the same day.

What do you do?

Case Study 2

S is a second-year student. S has been battling on with their anxiety and depression since day one in Cambridge. As a consequence, their exam results were mediocre, in spite of their obvious ability. This year Michaelmas has been difficult, as is clear from S's supervision reports; and at the start of Lent it is becoming clear that things are not working.

How do you proceed?

Case Study 3

An email from a first-year student

Dear Dr Smith

As you know, I am in a wheel chair and this year I am in an accessible room. I was very upset to hear today that I have got to stay in this room all my time in Cambridge, because all my friends are going to be in the second-year accommodation block. It is very inconsiderate of the College not to provide more accessible rooms.

I'd also like to complain about the staff here. The porters will not take my books back to the college library, and I am worried about library fines. And the cleaner will not make my bed for me because she says it's not her job to do that – so why is she called a bedder?

As you also know, the law says you have to make reasonable adjustments for me.

Best,

Charlie

Case Study 4

You receive the following email from a student's DoS

Dear Pat

I am concerned about the progress of Sam Xxxx. His supervisors report that he responds very little in supervisions and often will just say 'I don't know', even when the question or problem is repeated a few times.

Over the course of the term he has become quieter and quieter and he has not attended the last few. One of his supervisors has described him as 'rude and evasive'. He also does not seem to be engaging in College life. I am aware that Sam has a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, but I am unsure whether he has taken up the support offered by the ADRC (and I'm a little unsure what they can do and whether they can advise staff). Do you have any advice?

Case Study 5

An email from a DoS in your college

Dear Pat

I've done everything I can to help Paul and Susan, my two students with specific learning disabilities, but I just can't go on – they take up too much of my time, and anyway, I don't think they should be at Cambridge. They both get 25% extra time in exams, but I don't think that's fair on the other students. Paul often turns up late, but apparently that's due to his inability to organise himself well, which is classified as a SpLD. And Susan says she needs extra supervisions because everything is too difficult for her otherwise – and if I get annoyed, she tells me I'm harassing her. If you can't sort this out, I'm going to tell the Senior Tutor I won't be their DoS any more.

Mark

Case Study 6

You know that one of your second-year undergraduate male students has suffered through suicidal thoughts in the past. His marks are not brilliant, but he is turning work in. You are aware that he has been to the UCS. Earlier in the year, a psychiatrist has been involved and they have reported that the student is not experiencing suicidal thoughts. However, other students are talking to their tutors and to the college nurse, saying that they worry about him. You have also received a phone call from the student's parents, who are living abroad, and they are very concerned about their son.

You have spoken to the student and he tells you that he is ok - what would you do?

Case Study 7

A first-year undergraduate student has been losing weight. She looks very thin. Her grades are very good, and her supervisors are happy with her progress. But they are also concerned about her health as she looks gaunt. Her friends are also worried and have talked to the JCR. Another of your Tutees on the welfare team of JCR has now contacted you about her. You have noted that she was very thin and is often suffering from colds. When you ask how she is when you meet her, she is always positive and tells you she loves Cambridge and it means so much for her to be here.

What do you think you could do in this case?

Case Study 8

Student A (international student, first year) comes from a family with strong views about traditional family units and heterosexual relationships. Student A has found Cambridge to be a more accepting place. In recent months, they have developed romantic feelings for their male friend. Student A thinks they would be rejected or disowned by their family if they pursued a relationship with a man. They have been overwhelmed with worry and experiencing feelings of guilt and shame.

In the past week they have avoided hall meals and their peer group at College, as seeing the friend prompts some symptoms of panic. The situation has begun to impact on their ability to focus and study well at a crucial time in Easter Term. They haven't felt able to talk to anyone about this before, but open up to you in a planned Tutor/Tutee meeting and ask for advice, as they tell you they can't go on like this.

How might you approach the conversation when Student A raises this with you?

Case studies session 5: Postgraduate Committee and postgraduate supervisors

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When discussing case studies in small groups, please consider these questions:

13. What are the most important issues raised by this case study?
14. What action might you take as a Tutor?
15. What might be the impact of these actions on the student(s)?

Case Study 1

A self-funded PhD student started in Michaelmas term and received a supervision report rating their progress as 'very good' the following Easter Term. No further reports were submitted. The first-year viva took place the following September and was failed. Eventually, the college asked for an update and was notified that the student had been advised to submit an MPhil dissertation instead.

Unfortunately, communications between the supervisor and the student had broken down and there was a delay in the viva outcome being communicated to the student, during which time the student had continued to work on the original PhD project. The student did not wish to change to an MPhil so two further vivas were arranged, each resulting in a fail. The student withdrew from the University with no degree.

What steps might have averted this disappointing outcome?

Case Study 2

An overseas 3rd year PhD student is working away on their fieldwork. The supervisor submits a PFRS report rating the student's progress as 'satisfactory' but in the text the supervisor states that they have not heard from the student in the last 4 months (despite sending a number of emails).

What might the Postgraduate Tutor do in this case?

Case Study 3

An overseas PhD student with known mental health concerns did not submit their thesis by their submission date or apply for an extension, and was withdrawn from study. Following the withdrawal, the student was notified that their visa would be revoked by the Home Office. No PFRS reports were submitted for the fourth year of study. The student, who was in the final stages of writing up, immediately made arrangements to leave the UK and did not submit their thesis.

What steps might have averted this disappointing outcome?