

CETL-MSOR Conference 2015

Greta Millwood: Re-pacing mathematics support to transcend the propensity for “cramming”

Mathematics support tends to be characterised as being a remedial measure, designed to address deficiencies in the mathematical knowledge required for degree courses across various disciplines, and often at a late stage, when coursework deadlines and examinations are imminent. Yet student feedback consistently manifests an enthusiasm for and interest in ameliorating mathematical competence, and a regret that such provision all too often becomes a matter of “cramming”.

Whilst it is easy to blame students for neglecting mathematics or even “burying their heads in the sand”, it is important that institutions should take responsibility for positioning mathematics support more prominently in student life. Staff experience and student feedback all lend credence to the suggestion that mathematics support needs to be re-distributed throughout the academic year.

A difficult dilemma is how to strike a balance between encouraging students to cultivate independent study skills and guiding students more closely. To address this, and to ensure that students ultimately grow some level of fluency in maths, careful consideration needs to be given to teaching methods, resources, and the structure of contact hours.

We will consider some of the various types of interaction between students and maths tutors at the University of East London, from unstructured provision during drop-in hours to in-session workshops run for and in liaison with academic departments.

We will draw on our practical experience following a major expansion of the mathematics support provision at the University of East London in January 2015, reflect on the current state of things and what could be done on the part of the institution, academic and support staff to turn mathematics support from a reactive stop-gap to a more regular, proactive, and intellectually locupletative journey that spans the entire academic year.