Learning Support and Wellbeing: Annual Report 2015-16

Learning Support and Wellbeing (LSW) is a department within Student Services at Plymouth University. This report includes an executive summary and submissions from each of the LSW teams as follows: Learning Gateway and LSW administration; Disability Assist (DA), Learning Development (LD), Multi-faith Chaplaincy, Peer Assisted Learning (PALS), Student Counselling and Personal Development (SCPD), including the Care Leavers and Mental Health teams. It also includes a report from the maths and statistics service SUM: UP.
Learning Support and Wellbeing (LSW) at Plymouth University is a department within Student Services. It brings together key areas of activity aiming to develop Plymouth University students’ ability to make the most of their studies and to enhance their overall learning experience. This report summarises the activities of the LSW teams in 2015-16 and describes their services, locations and staffing structure. LSW was established in 2012 and reorganised in 2014. The department has undergone a number of significant changes since then with a general expansion of our work in many areas. There was a reduction in staffing in the LD, PALS, DA and SCPD teams following the 2014 review; and, from July 2015, an expansion of the Disability Assist and Counselling teams in response to unprecedented increases in demand for those services. The restyling of Student Counselling to include Personal Development was undertaken to demonstrate how we address the needs of students holistically from entry and progression towards graduation, employment and participation in social life. The department consists of:

- **Learning Gateway** ([www1.plymouth.ac.uk/learninggateway](http://www1.plymouth.ac.uk/learninggateway)) - a single access point in the Roland Levinsky building for information and access to services with a combined reception and administrative team.

- **Disability Assist** – offering advice and support to students with disabilities, specific learning differences and difficulties.

- **Learning Development** - a range of activities (including the Writing Café and the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow) for developing student learning and academic practice.

- **The Multi-Faith Chaplaincy** - for faith-based support and social activities; located at 1, Kirkby Terrace.

- **PALS@Plymouth** – the Peer Assisted Learning Scheme, offering opportunities for enhanced learning in sessions led by students.

- **Student Counselling and Personal Development** (SCPD) providing individual counselling and support, and group sessions for personal development. SCPD includes the Counselling team; Care Leaver Team; the Listening Post and (from October 2015) the Mental Health Support team.

- A drop-in facility providing mathematics and statistics support, **SUM:UP**, is also associated with LSW.
LSW in 2015/16: Executive Summary

During 2015/16 the LSW teams saw a further rise in participation in all of our activities, as shown by the statistics in the reports below; and increases in demand for our services to support learning; we also made substantial changes to increase the range of opportunities on offer from our services.

Learning Gateway (LG)

- Over 6200 visitors came to our ‘one-stop-shop’ in the Roland Levinsky Building to seek information and advice about the range of Learning Support and Wellbeing services, or to book appointments with members of our teams.

Disability Assist (DA)

- Worked with staff across the institution, and networked nationally, to inform our response to, and raise awareness about, the reductions to Disabled Students Allowances.
- Developed and delivered 14 training and information sessions for academic staff in conjunction with Teaching and Learning Support on inclusive approaches to teaching and supporting learning.
- Fitness for Study and Reasonable Adjustments Review: DA staff participated in policy implementation and review, attending very many Fitness for Study Case Conferences. The DA manager is drafting the University’s Reasonable Adjustments Policy.
- Pre-admission: DA sent 1,078 letters to inform new Plymouth University students of our services and offer information about support for their specific needs.
- Held 55 individual pre-entry information meetings a 72% increase on last year (32).
- Offered a pre-induction programme for 24 students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) prior to ‘Welcome Week’. 80% of participants reported that it aided significantly their transition to HE.
- Worked with 141 students in Welcome Week to advise on issues such as Dyslexia
- Participated in 288 Faculty based Student Support Meetings
- Supported 1247 individual students over the year.
- Ran 90-plus group and one to one specialist Study Skills sessions for over 200 students.
- Completed 983 Student Support Documents containing information for academics about individual students' specific needs.
Learning Development (LD)

- Worked with students and staff to reach a large proportion of learners in taught sessions developing skills for writing, thinking critically and studying. Over 7500 participants attended taught LD sessions.

- Clocked up 365 hours of teaching time (up 35% on previous year) including one to one and group sessions. Ran 154 taught sessions in collaboration with academic staff.

- Worked with students in over 400 one-to-one tutorials.

- Coordinated the Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow provision – available for writing tutorials for two days per week in term time.

- Achieved further improvements in Plymouth’s acclaimed online Study Guides, and produced materials for the Digital Learning Environment.

- Analysed and evaluated provision to assess effectiveness for WP and discovered more than 50% of students using LD fit WP categories.

- Found that over 90% of students would recommend LD to others. Over 60% reported that their engagement with LD was a significant factor in helping them meet academic expectations.

- Developed the Writing Café offer with a doubling of uptake to 1326 visitors in 2015/16. 12 Student Writing Mentors were trained to assist in the café.

- Evidence from student surveys include many ‘Commendation’ comments, such as, ‘The Writing Café has boosted my confidence in writing’, and, ‘The writing cafe, and associated help were … priceless’.

- Relaunched and further developed the Writing for Assignments E-library (WrAssE) interactive learning application which allows academic staff (and students) the ability to submit examples of good writing with comments for others to view. At the beginning of July 2016, Wrasse had received over 335 registered signups nationally and internationally.

Multi-Faith Chaplaincy

- Distributed 900 free meals to students via a new ‘Souper Tuesday’ initiative combining social, pastoral and nutritional objectives with awareness-raising about food.

- Developed a new annual lecture series in partnership with Christians in Science, South West. These talks will focus on issues of faith and science. The first lecture, attended by 101 people, was delivered by Bob White and was on natural disasters.

- Assisted the Director of Student Services in negotiating improved arrangements for prayer space and for Muslim Friday prayers. The UPSU #RightToPray campaign, and
the constructive engagement of Davide Bertelli, VP (International and Outreach), made a major contribution to this positive outcome.

- Arranged a new ‘welcome’ event for new clergy, including a campus talk and an address by the Pro Vice-Chancellor Teaching and Learning
- Organised a public vigil and commemoration of the 75th anniversary of a bomb blast on Portland Square air raid shelter which killed 76 people during the Plymouth Blitz.

Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS)

- In 2015/16 the Peer Assisted Learning (PALS) scheme operated in over 90 Programmes and was available to over 3000 students. The PALS team have trained over 400 student leaders to date. In the last year, PALS grew by 50% in terms of participating programmes and numbers of PALS leaders, although staffing remained static
- In February 2016, PALS held its inaugural Gala Dinner. Deputy Vice Chancellor Simon Payne gave the welcome address to 130 student and staff attendees.
- In December 2015 19 PALS Impact Reports were issued. These annual reports, available on request from carolyn.gentle@plymouth.ac.uk, are compiled for each participating subject/programme based on data gathered during the first half of semester 1, including Induction Week.
- Two new projects were also initiated this year: PALS for students with Access Bursaries; and the PALS/LD Transitions Desk Calendar and Wall Planner.
- In the wake of changes to the DSA, a further pilot project is planned for 2016/17: Empowering PALS will work alongside Disability Assist to offer PAL practice hours to all participating students with a study focus on learning strategies.

Student Counselling and Personal Development (SCPD)

- The Student Counselling team provided 1,142 students with 4,409 individual appointments – an increase of 18.5% on the previous year; average waiting times were reduced by 37.5% with all students being seen for their first appointment within ten days. Against key academic outcomes, well over 90% of students surveyed reported that counselling had helped with their persistence on their course; their academic success; and with the development of skills for employability such as self-confidence.
- Our volunteer-staffed Listening Post programme continued to grow, offering immediate access to help for students in distress on 235 occasions in 2015/16 and contributing to our ability to refer effectively to other services – vital to maintaining an excellent student support experience.
- Two key Student Counselling and Personal Development (SCPD) initiatives won honours in 2015/16 – the SHINE project hosting online self-help resources, was recognised through the UPSU SSTAR awards, and a research report on enhancing the wellbeing of international students was ‘highly commended’ by the UK Council for International Student Affairs.

- SCPD offered an expanded range of groups and workshops for wellbeing in 2015/16, including a women’s group; a men’s group; mindfulness; relaxation and the acclaimed ‘Moodboost’ CBT based programme.

- The Mental Health support team, in its first year of operation worked with over 450 students offering one to one appointments and a range wellbeing activities including a ‘Stress Less’ event, an art competition, and the University Mental Health awareness day.

- The Care Leavers team engaged with 82 students in the last year, offering 495 appointments. The service evaluation revealed a hugely positive response with students citing the service as contributing significantly to their employability, achievement, retention and overall satisfaction.

In addition to the many achievements of the LSW teams and their services to students, our staff contributed to wide range of cross-University initiatives on policy and practice in higher education. For example: we worked extensively on improving the University’s Fitness for Study policy and implementation procedures; offered training for staff on Mental Health and disability conditions; developed awareness-raising sessions on the changes to Disabled Students Allowances; helped to develop further the ‘Plymouth Compass’ initiative and the Higher Education Achievement Record and contributed to the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. We have continued to work closely with academics, the Students Union and its officers; other support staff, especially in Residence Life; the Complaints and Appeals Office; Student Finance; the International Office; and the Faculty offices. LSW facilitates joint meetings between local health professionals, student representatives and staff of the University Medical Centre. Our staff have also played an important role in knowledge creation and research with a number of new academic publications and presentations developed in 2015/16; these are listed in our ‘academic outputs report’ see Appendix A.

In all, the last year has demonstrated once again the immense value of the work done in LSW to provide students with timely, appropriate and embedded support and development opportunities for their personal lives, and skills for learning, success and employment in the context of active membership of an academic community.

John Hilsdon, Head of Learning Support and Wellbeing, September 2016