



Economics Student Success Advisor (SSA) service: Summary Report



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Introduction

Commissioned by the University of Bristol's Strategic Programmes and Projects team, Bristol SU's Research and Insight Team conducted a research project to evaluate the **Student Success Advisor (SSA) service**, which has been operating in the School of Economics for the past three years. The SSA service is a student support model operated by professional service staff to help students with queries in lieu of a personal tutoring system.

The team carried out **five focus groups** with Economics students from Years 1–3, alongside **six one-to-one interviews** with staff from the School of Economics. This report summarises the research findings.

Participant characteristics

Focus Groups (students)

- 12 students from **first, second and third year** of their undergraduate degree in the School of Economics were chosen. All students have experienced the SSA scheme for the entirety of their time at the University of Bristol.
- **40 students** signed up and confirmed attendance for the focus groups, but fewer were able to attend on the day. Those who did attend told us that many students are balancing **busy schedules** and often need to prioritise **academic or career-related commitments**.
- Focus groups were **representative**, including students of different fee statuses and genders, as well as some disabled and neurodiverse students.

Interviews (staff)

- 6 key staff members were chosen for interview, with **varying levels of involvement** with the scheme. This included staff who were involved in the initial planning stages and the functioning of the scheme.
- SSA staff were not invited to interview.

Key Takeaways: Students

- Students reported **widespread confusion** about SSA roles and the range of support available, leading to **inconsistent experiences**.
- **Awareness of the programme was limited, and attendance was relatively low.** As a result, it has not fully bridged the gap left by the personal tutoring elements that changed under the SSA model.
- Those who engaged with the service **found it helpful**, particularly for administrative queries and signposting.
- Students expressed a strong desire for **proactive, ongoing relationships with a familiar staff member** who understands their academic journey, and felt the reactive SSA model did not meet this need.
- Large cohort sizes and limited personal relationships contributed to a **weak sense of belonging within the School**.

It's very hard to find out how to contact them, there are too many links. We need physical advertisements on the support.

I thought that contacting them was useful as the team adjusted my timetable as requested.

It's very difficult to have to email so many people... it does make a difference to how supported you can feel if you have one person to have a conversation with.

Key Takeaways: Staff

- Staff felt that the SSA model helped **provide more consistent guidance** on procedures and pastoral support than the previous personal tutor system, which benefited students who made use of it.
- However, **engagement remained low** (estimated 15–30%) due to the reactive, self-selecting nature of the model, limiting its reach despite higher levels of student need.
- Some **structural issues**, such as information in e-Vision indicating that all students had a personal tutor, created confusion about what support was available and how to access it.
- Many staff highlighted the importance of students having an ongoing **relationship with a named academic** in their subject area, as this can support academic development, confidence, and a sense of belonging within the discipline.

They [SSAs] know how to help better than most academic colleagues will know, because it's very specific knowledge.

It's not a standard model across the uni, so there is confusion about what it's there for.

Where it hasn't worked well is building relationships with academics, the part which helps students develop within the discipline.

Recommendations

- Students reported that having **the same personal tutor** throughout their degree helps build trust and makes it easier to seek support. Regular check-ins could help maintain this connection and provide ongoing guidance.
- **Small-group tutorials or catch-ups** could provide more opportunities for students to get to know others on their course and feel part of a community, particularly within large cohorts.
- Clear and comprehensive **information should be provided at the start of each academic year** outlining the personal tutoring system, the types of issues appropriate for support (e.g. ECs, extensions), and routes to access help.
- Ensuring that **expectations and responsibilities for personal tutors** are clearly defined and supported with practical resources could help provide a more consistent experience for students.
- Clear **escalation pathways** for issues beyond academic expertise (e.g. mental health, complex procedures) would make support easier to access.
- Streamlining how meetings are scheduled and how reminders are sent could make it easier for students to **arrange appointments and attend them**.
- **Drop-in sessions** with a Senior Tutor could provide a straightforward way for students to ask general questions or seek quick guidance without needing to book a full appointment.

