

Student Perspectives on Engaging with Economics Content Support Schemes

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“The first few weeks of tertiary study is a time of high vulnerability with many new demands, when old supports have been left behind and new ones not yet generated.” (Farnill & Robertson, 1990 p. 179)

The student mindset:

- The main worries for new students are around mental health support, student finance and adjusting to university life and study (Department for Education, 2021)
- First year students face stress related to academic concerns and adjusting to a new environment which includes new customs, practices and language, as well as negotiating the hidden curriculum of higher education and economics (Mearman, 2024; Jones and Frydenberg, 2000)

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- Universities put support systems in place to alleviate some of these concerns
- We have seen that these services are not being fully utilise d

Motivation

- One key reason for the underutilisation of support schemes—particularly office hours—is a **mismatch between institutional intentions and student perceptions**.
 - Office hours are often seen as a last-resort option (Smith et al., 2017) or as ineffective unless directly linked to grades (Guerrero & Rod, 2013).

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- **Student help-seeking behaviour** also plays a significant role in utilisation (Johnson et al., 2022).
 - This behaviour varies by gender, ethnicity, nationality, academic performance, and time spent in higher education—for example, comparing first-year to final-year students (Magaard et al., 2017; Disabato et al., 2018; Rafal et al., 2018; Clark, 2005).

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 - This behaviour varies by gender, ethnicity, nationality, academic performance, and time spent in higher education—for example, comparing first-year to final-year students (Magaard et al., 2017; Disabato et al., 2018; Rafal et al., 2018; Clark, 2005).
- Since the ultimate goal is to support students in successfully navigating university life, **it is essential to consult them—as the primary users of these services—when seeking to improve support provision.**

Research Questions

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1. What factors influence students' decisions to engage with—or avoid—available support services?
2. How can support schemes be better tailored to meet the diverse needs of first-year economics students across different programmes and backgrounds?

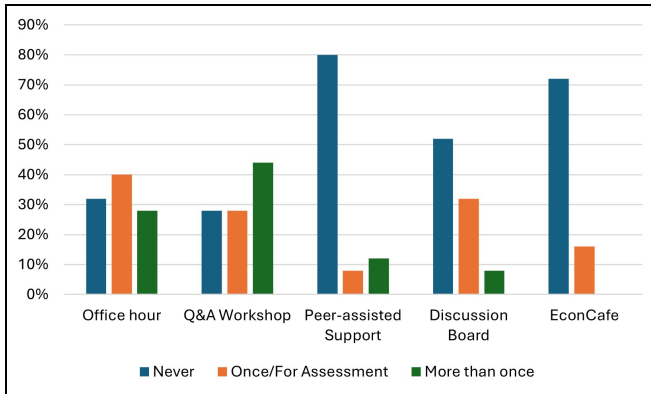
Support at the RG Institution

The **content** support provided for first year students in 2024/25 can be divided into three groups:

- **Holistic support:** EconCafé- 5-week drop-in support initiative in the autumn term where all Economics students could ask any questions about navigating their university life.
- **Instructor support:** Office hours, Discussion Boards, Q&A Workshop
- **Peer support:** Student Assisted Guidance in Economics (SAGE) Scheme, Academic-coordinated, SAGE leaders, top second-year students, run weekly 1-hour drop-in study support sessions for first year students based on discussions rather than teaching.

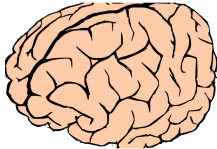
Data and Method

- A survey was distributed to all first-year students via email and presented in lectures during March 2025.
- Response rate was low, with only 25 completed surveys.
- Findings indicate a general underutilisation of available support schemes.



- Focus group discussions were held in March 2025, involving 14 first-year economics students across 3 groups.
- Discussions explored:
 - Factors influencing attendance and non-attendance across support schemes, comparing TB1 (Autumn) and TB2 (Spring) usage
 - Student-led suggestions for improving engagement and tailoring support
- Responses were sorted by support scheme and coded based on use, non-use, and recommendations.
- A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns across groups.
- Preliminary findings address both research questions: the factors that influence students' decisions to engage with—or avoid—content support schemes, and how support can be better designed to meet diverse student needs.

Factors Affecting Engagement



Awareness and Understanding



Timing and Scheduling



Confidence and preparedness



Perceived Usefulness and Value



Duplication and Overload

Figure 2: Factors Affect Content Support Use

Awareness and Understanding

- **Initial confusion** about what the schemes actually offer
- **Information overload** during welcome week/ induction week leads students to overlook optional services

In Their Own Words

"I didn't use any other resources except for like, discussion board, also because like, I don't really know that you could go and ask the lecturers during your office hours for anything. So a lot of it's like, just I'm being unaware I didn't think I could actually just go."

Timing and Scheduling

- **Clashes with lectures or other commitments** are major barriers across all schemes
- **Early morning sessions** (e.g. 9am Q&A Workshops) are poorly attended
- Students prefer **flexible formats** drop-in vs. bookable, online vs. in-person

In Their Own Words

"To me probably the biggest problem with office hours, one of them is conflict. So a lot of them actually conflict with our lectures and sometimes the same kind of subject like you are doing, like take Course A as an example, it often conflict with one of the subjects you are actually studying and you cannot just make it."

Confidence and Preparedness

- Students avoid support when they feel “too far behind” or unsure what to ask.
- Intimidation in office hours or discomfort with peer tutors affects engagement.
- Lack of guidance on how to prepare for sessions reduces usage.

In Their Own Words

“I feel like if I fell too behind in the course, like I’m just too confused, I don’t know what to ask. So then if I’m too behind, I ended up not using the office hour, because I don’t know what ask. But if I was just a bit confused, then that’s like the right moment to use office hour.”

Perceived Usefulness and Value

- Students are more likely to attend when they see clear academic benefits (e.g., assignment feedback, exam strategies).
- Peer-led schemes are valued for relatable advice, but concerns about tutor reliability can deter use.
- Discussion boards are only used when lecturers actively engage.

In Their Own Words

"Among all the lectures and courses I've attended, like for those lecturers who prefer the discussion board, students would also prefer to use it. For those who almost never use it, it's like empty and no one ask questions. "

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In Their Own Words

"From my past experience, I think SAGE is like the most beneficial to me by speaking to students only in the year above you who've done well on the same course that you're doing as well compared to like the others where like the lecturer can't tell you too much about what's coming up in the exam or they can't help you too much with the coursework but the leaders at SAGE can."

Duplication and Overload

- Too many overlapping schemes (e.g., Econ CafEconCafé, office hours, SAGE) cause confusion.
- Students struggle to decide which service suits their needs.
- Some suggest streamlining support and providing clearer guidance.

In their own Words

"I feel like in terms of support options, I feel if anything it's too much or it's not clear how SAGE is different to Office Hours, is different EconCafEconCafé, is different Q&A sessions. I wouldn't know, they seem to kind of overlap in their functionality. I wouldn't know what questions are better suited to one rather than the other... "

Designing Support for First-Year Students

Based on the focus group analysis, support schemes can be tailored through the following strategies:

- Improve Clarity and Navigation
- Flexible Scheduling and Formats
- Build Confidence and Reduce Intimidation
- Staggered and Targeted Communication
- Streamline and Personalise Support

Improving Clarity and Navigation:

- Many students were unsure what each support scheme was for, especially during the induction week
- Some of the comments and recommendations showed that the students were still unclear at the end of the academic year.
- Tailoring should include **a clear support map or dashboard** that explains: what each scheme offers, who it's best suited for, and when and how to access it.

Improving Clarity and Navigation

In their own Words

“Maybe having the timings of the different support sessions posted on Blackboard or the check-in app—somewhere everyone can see often—so you’re constantly reminded. Mainly I get the info from emails, but we already get so many, so it’s not a priority. I just tend to forget I can access this kind of resource.” begincomment

Providing Flexible Scheduling and Formats

- Students from different programmes and backgrounds have varied timetables and commitments.
- Educators should ensure that office hours do not clash with core units' lectures
- Suggestions for tailoring include:
 - Rotating session times to avoid clashes
 - Offering both online and in-person formats
 - Mixing drop-in and bookable options

Providing Flexible Scheduling and Formats

In their own Words

"It was on Zoom, so it was much easier to join and work around the schedule. . . I'm quite far from uni, so going to office hours is a half-hour walk. Just having that kind of virtual option where I could ask anything and listen to other people's questions—I thought was quite helpful."

Building Student Confidence and Reducing Intimidation.

- Students from less traditional academic backgrounds or international students may feel less confident.
- Tailoring could include:
 - Guidance on how to prepare for sessions
 - Staff training to ensure approachable interactions
 - Peer-led options for those intimidated by staff

Building Student Confidence and Reducing Intimidation.

In their own Words

"...maybe at the start of the if you were told exactly like what the intended use are for each of the sessions, it would be a better way of knowing when you have a specific problem which one to use."

In their own Words

"In TB2, my lecturer pushed us to use more office hours and just ask more questions. A lot of it, I think, was like a lot of people were just quite intimidated. Yeah, me included."

Using Staggered and Targeted Communication

- Students absorb information differently depending on their background and the timing of the communication.
- Tailoring should involve:
 - Reintroducing support schemes later in the term
 - Using targeted messaging (e.g., reminders before assessments)
 - Embedding promotion into lectures and seminars

Using Staggered and Targeted Communication

In their own Words

"When you first come into uni you're adjusting to everything. . . figuring out lectures, course materials, all this important stuff. That takes priority, so being aware of things like SAGE and EconCafé wasn't my top priority. I just didn't know about them until they came back to reintroduce themselves—and that was a lot more useful than at the start."

Streamlining and Personalising Support

- Overlapping schemes confuse students, especially those unfamiliar with UK university systems.
- Tailoring could include:
 - Consolidating similar schemes to reduce duplication
 - Offering opt-in personal tutoring for those who want mentoring
 - Evaluate the potential of adding extra lectures or review sessions for complex modules.

Designing Support for First-Year Students

Streamlining and Personalising Support

In Their Own Words

"so in terms of academic support, is it possible to allocate a personal tutor to the student who really needs the personal tutor, for example, like they want someone to get familiar with and track their studies and to establish a relationship..."

In Their Own Words

"A good option to improve would be to reduce the number of similar substitutable options. . . If you streamlined the programme so things that are similar were put under the same umbrella. . . Office hours could be very similar to EconCafé, so why not have them together?"

Key Takeaways

1. Students value all three types of support—instructor-led, peer, and holistic—and the majority feel that the necessary areas of support are being provided.
2. While these resources are currently underutilised, students who do engage with them report finding them highly beneficial.
3. Communicating clearly and accessibly about the support available—and how it's intended to be used—is central to ensuring that provision is responsive to the diverse needs of students.

Key Takeaways

In their own Words

"...then in TB2 I went for a lot of office hours and also used a discussion board but I generally felt like the office hours were really really helpful... So like going to a lecture is really good because they can also help to like quickly identify what you don't know. And yeah, it was really great. It was really good"

In Their Own Words

"I use SAGE, I feel like it was really good because it was led by like the high achieving, like the most high achieving students from that year."

Thank You!