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Chapter 1

Case studies: these people need help!

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this chapter you will meet a number of students we have worked with over the years. Each one speaks English as a second language, and each one is concerned about some aspect of studying at university. At the end of the profile you will read some questions to help you identify the problems they faced.

When you have thought about your own ideas, look at the suggestions at the end of the book (pp. 201–3). If it turns out that you are concerned about the same thing, then follow the directions to the chapter or chapters that will help you.

Case study 1 Chamroeun

Chamroeun is studying for an undergraduate degree. Although most of his lectures are large, and a bit impersonal, he is pleased to be in one class that is small enough for the lecturer to know the students by name. This lecturer encourages everyone to ask questions in class and even to go to her office if they have additional problems with their assignments.

Chamroeun takes up the offer every time and is a constant visitor to the lecturer's office. At first his questions are all about his assignments but gradually, as he realises how kind she is, he starts talking to her about problems with his girlfriend. Lately he senses that she is not so keen to talk about his personal problems, although she continues to be helpful with questions about his assignments. She has even suggested that he might like to see a counsellor.

He is puzzled. In his country staff members are very interested in every aspect of a student's life. Why is this person suggesting he should see a counsellor. 'I'm not going mad,' he says to himself. 'Why on earth would she suggest such a thing?'

QUESTIONS

- 1 How many problems does this student seem to have?
- 2 Can you explain the lecturer's attitude?

Case study 2 Hanna

Hanna is always surprised when her assignments are returned. Sometimes the mark is much higher than she had expected but the reverse also happens. For instance, last week she got back an assignment that she had worked on solidly for a week. Yet, she only got a B. The big surprise, though, was the lecturer's comments. The lecturer praised several aspects of the assignment. How could he possibly praise her for such a low mark? It doesn't make sense.

Hanna doesn't know how to tell her parents about this terrible grade. When she did her first degree in her own country she always had top grades, which is why she was given a scholarship to study overseas. Now, in her postgraduate studies, here comes this disgrace. She feels lonely and ashamed.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How many problems is Hanna facing?
 - 2 Who could help her with them?
-

Case study 3 Tanako

Tanako is a popular student who has had no trouble making friends in her new country. People are always complimenting her on her English and saying things like ‘We can understand everything you say.’ What’s more, she never has to ask people to repeat themselves. She gets their meaning the first time.

When it comes to her assignments, however, the lecturers are often making suggestions about her getting some help with her writing. How can they say this when all her friends understand her so well? It doesn’t make sense.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Can you explain why her friends and the markers of her assignments are giving her different messages?
 - 2 What advice would you give to Tanako?
-

Case study 4 Laura

Laura is extremely shy. She was horrified to discover that tutorials meant discussion time. What is worse, the tutor sometimes calls on students to answer by name. She finishes each tutorial feeling embarrassed and stupid. The other students probably think she understands nothing, but that’s not true. She understands most of what the other students and the tutor are saying but she is scared to speak.

She is thinking that it might be best to avoid tutorials altogether except when an assignment is being given out. That would save her being constantly embarrassed.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How many reasons can you suggest for Laura’s attitude?
 - 2 What advice would you give her?
-

Case study 5 Phond

Phond has come to a Western university for just one year to do a postgraduate diploma. She doesn’t really need this for her chosen career but her parents believe having a foreign qualification will help her to find a really good job in her own country.

After the first class test this student is shocked to find that her grade is B-. Immediately she goes to see the lecturer, feeling sure that this kind person will understand. She starts explaining:

‘This qualification doesn’t mean much to me but it does to my parents and they have spent a huge amount of money sending me here. Would you be able to adjust the mark please?’

To her shock the lecturer looks quite severe and says “No, definitely not.” The lecturer also says he considers B- a good mark for the first test in a new country and a new course.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Who is being unreasonable here: the lecturer or the student, and why?
 - 2 What would you suggest the student does next?
-

Case study 6 Ken

Ken is concerned because he cannot take down everything that is said during lectures. However fast he writes he cannot keep up. What is worse, when he goes to read his notes later they don’t make sense. He is afraid that without understanding the lectures he will fail the course.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Is Ken right that without lecture notes he will fail the course?
 2. What suggestions would you make for overcoming his problems?
-

Case study 7 Fukang

Fukang is having a hard time getting used to living in the new country. In his home country

he usually studies with others in groups or at least spends time with them after class. Every student joins a club of some sort, either sports or a hobby. Here students immediately rush off after class without paying much attention to each other. Although there are some university clubs, often people seem to arrive together in pairs or small groups and it is difficult to talk to them. Fukang is starting to feel lonely and is also finding it hard to motivate himself to study alone.

QUESTION

- 1 How can Fukang connect with people and avoid becoming isolated?
-

Case study 8 Tanya

Tanya is enjoying her university studies in her new country except for one thing: oral presentations. Whenever the tutor announces that next week students will start presenting their assignments to the rest of the class, she starts to feel unwell. She gets headaches, her throat goes dry and she feels physically ill. The main reason for this is that her spoken English is not as good as her understanding of other people's speaking. On top of this, even in her own language she never enjoyed public speaking. She thinks it might be a good idea to ask the tutor what she needs to do to be excused from oral presentations.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What do you think of Tanya's solution to the problem?
 - 2 If you were her friend, what would you advise her to do?
-

Case study 9 Marco

Marco's problem is the amount of reading that is expected for the course. He reads English quite well, but not fast. Staying up later and later doesn't seem to be helping. In fact, he is now having trouble waking up early enough to get to his first lecture of the morning.

One day he asks a friend, 'Why can't the lecturers hand out summaries of all our text books? That's what they used to do in my country.'

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why do you think lecturers don't hand out summaries?
 - 2 If you were the friend, what would you suggest to this sleepless student?
-

Case study 10 Umut

Umut found a wonderful article on the very topic of her assignment. She used large pieces of this article in her essay and now has received what looks like a very urgent email from the person marking the assignment. The email is full of words like 'serious', 'plagiarism' and 'explanation'. Even though she doesn't know the meaning of the word 'plagiarism', she can understand that there is a major problem (see Chapter 12 for more on Umut's case).

QUESTIONS

- 1 Do you think this student has been dishonest?
 - 2 How would you explain the word 'plagiarism' to her?
-

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