

## 2.2. LITERATURE REVIEW: A RESEARCH-INFORMED APPROACH TO IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL RETENTION

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### Introduction

In the UK there is a growing body of evidence relating to student retention and success in higher education.<sup>18</sup> In this brief paper we identify the factors contributing to early withdrawal and enhanced retention, and offer a reflective checklist to guide thinking about institutional strengths and areas for improvement.

### Factors contributing to early withdrawal

Research exploring the reasons for student withdrawal tends to conclude that there is rarely a single reason why students leave. In most cases, the picture is complex, and students leave as a result of a combination of inter-related factors. The most comprehensive national survey of students withdrawing from university was conducted by Yorke in the mid-1990s (n = 2151) (Yorke et al 1997). It identified the five most significant reasons for student non-completion: incompatibility between the student and institution, lack of preparation for the higher education experience, lack of commitment to the course, financial hardship and poor academic progress. Yorke and Longden's more recent survey (2008) identified the following seven factors as contributing to early withdrawal: poor quality learning experience; not coping with academic demand; wrong choice of field of study; unhappy with location and environment; dissatisfied with institutional resourcing; problems with finance and employment; and problems with social integration. Davies and Elias (2002) obtained similar findings (with a sample of over 1 500 students). In their survey, the main factors for leaving were: a mistaken choice of course (24%), financial problems directly related to participating in higher education (18%), and personal problems (14%). More recently, the National Audit Office (NAO) (2007) identified seven types of reasons why students withdraw: personal reasons, lack of integration, dissatisfaction with course/institution, lack of preparedness, wrong choice of course, financial reasons and in order to pursue other opportunities.

In summary, the reasons for early withdrawal are:

#### a) Preparation for higher education

Some students are not adequately prepared for the transition into higher education, especially in academic terms (Quinn et al 2005; Van Stolk et al 2007).

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<sup>18</sup> A full review of the literature is available at:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/wprs/WPRS\\_retention\\_synthesis](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/wprs/WPRS_retention_synthesis)

**b) Institutional and course match**

Students who leave higher education often find that the programme they have enrolled in does not meet their expectations or that they are simply on the wrong course (Quinn et al 2005, NAO 2007, Yorke and Longden 2008). In the UK, this problem can be exaggerated by students who enter courses and institutions through the clearing process (a service available for students without a university placement as a result of poor exam results, in order to find a suitable vacancy). There is body of US research about institutional match and integration – the extent to which the institution is perceived to meet the needs of the students and how far they feel part of the institution (e.g. Tinto 1993, Berger and Braxton 1998).

**c) Academic experience**

Students may lack basic skills, fail to adjust to the unfamiliar approaches to learning and teaching, struggle with aspects of the academic discipline, fail assessments and feel unable to ask staff or peers for help (e.g. Yorke and Longden 2008).

Students are most likely to leave in their year of entry (Yorke, et al 1997; Thomas, 2002; Quinn et al 2005, Yorke and Longden 2007) which highlights the importance of the first year experience. Particular issues are: induction, learning and teaching environments, pedagogy and assessment (c.f. Laing and Robinson, 2003, Thomas 2002, Rhodes and Nevill 2004).

**d) Social integration**

A further area of importance is that of social integration (Harvey and Drew 2006) – i.e. the extent to which students feel that they ‘fit in’, particularly in a social sense. Some research results tend to suggest that non-academic factors have more weight than academic factors in withdrawal decisions (e.g. Bers and Smith, 1991). Local students are often less engaged socially than peers living on a university campus (see Quinn et al 2005, Longden and Yorke 2008). Part-time students are also less able (and sometimes less inclined) to participate in social activities. Indeed, for many students from under-represented groups, the classroom provides the only opportunity for developing peer relations, and thus learning strategies ought to address this need.

**e) Financial issues**

There is research evidence about the impact of financial issues on early withdrawal, especially by students from lower socio-economic groups (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997; Yorke et al., 1997; Yorke, 1999; Dodgson & Bolam, 2002), but most studies, conclude that finance *per se* is not the main reason why students withdraw from HE.

**f) Personal circumstances**

Personal circumstances can include mental and physical health problems, caring for a relative, childcare, bereavement, etc. All studies show that, although these factors are relevant for some students, they are not as significant as is sometimes assumed.

## Factors enhancing student retention and success

### a) Pre-entry information and preparation

Pre-entry information and preparation for higher education includes the provision of information to inform choice and shape expectations about higher education, the institution and the course to improve retention (Yorke and Thomas 2003, Dodgson and Bolam 2002).

### b) Induction and transition support

Induction is used to make the expectations and practices of higher education explicit to students (Action on Access 2003). Institutions are recognising the value of a “longer and thinner” induction experience that starts early and lasts longer than one week. According to Harvey and Drew (2006), induction is regarded as a significant part of the package to promote good student retention. But research implies a need to clarify the aims and purposes of induction, to separate out and provide the necessary information in a timely manner (rather than all at once).

The key issues to be communicated in induction are about:

- i) course material
- ii) learning support services
- iii) general information about the university and the environs
- iv) adaptation to university life
- v) becoming an autonomous learner
- vi) course and assessment requirements
- vii) ways to develop the skills needed for academic work or for work-based learning.

### c) Curriculum development

Curriculum development is at the heart of what institutions can do to improve student retention and success.

For many students, their academic interactions are the only way in which they interact with the institution, so that learning, teaching, assessment and course content become central to students' experience and their decision to stay or leave early.

In particular, research evidence points to the importance of:

- i) Active learning and teaching strategies
- ii) Formative assessment
- iii) Relevant courses
- iv) Integrated personal tutoring and study support
- v) Flexible learning

*i) Active learning and teaching strategies*

Many efforts to improve student retention and success via learning, teaching and assessment approaches focus on promoting greater student engagement in the classroom. This is primarily being undertaken by moving from largely teacher-centred approaches towards student-centred learning practices. There is a consensus that interactive as opposed to didactic teaching improves academic success and promotes the inclusion of learners who might feel like outsiders (Bamber and Tett, 2001; Haggis and Pouget, 2002; Thomas, 2002; Parker *et al*, 2005). Student-centred learning conceives of students as playing a more active role in their learning processes, and drawing on their existing knowledge, previous experiences and personal interests to enhance engagement, course commitment and retention on the programme. De Corte (2000) (in the context of Belgian schooling) identified the following features of a “powerful learning environment”. It should:

- include group discussions of both the content and the process of learning and studying
- provide authentic tasks and realistic problems that have personal meaning and future use
- initiate and support active and constructive learning processes (conceptual understanding) and
- enhance students’ awareness of their own cognitive processes and their ability to control their motives and feelings (cognitive and volitional self-regulation).

Active learning is often associated with experiential, problem-based and project-based learning, and other forms of collaborative learning, and less reliance on the large lecture format. Boud and Feletti (1998, p2) identify the key features of a problem-based learning approach as:

- using stimulus material to help students discuss an important problem, question or issue
- presenting the problem as a simulation of professional practice or a real-life situation
- appropriately guiding students’ critical thinking and providing limited resources to help them learn from defining and attempting to resolve a given problem
- having students work co-operatively as a group, exploring information in and out of class, with access to a tutor who knows the problem well and can facilitate the group’s learning process
- getting students to identify their own learning needs and appropriate use of available resources
- reapplying this knowledge to the original problem and evaluating their learning processes.

Vincent Tinto has promoted the idea of learning communities as a way of facilitating student engagement – both academically and socially. For example, “by registering students for the same course or having all new students study the same topic, the entering students form their own self-supporting associations to give each other academic and social support ” (Tinto, 2000, p28-9).

In Tinto’s work, students found that learning communities had academic and social benefits that impacted positively on student achievement and persistence (Tinto 1998, Tinto 2000).

*ii) Formative assessment*

Many students struggle to make the transition from a fairly structured learning experience in schools and colleges to the largely autonomous approach required by study at the higher level. Pedagogical research,

especially with non-traditional students, reports that formative assessment can offer an integrated and structured approach to equipping all students with the information and skills they need to make a successful transition to higher education and to continue to succeed academically (see Yorke 2001). Formative feedback is integrated into the learning experience, and so does not detract from discipline-focused teaching, and it also reaches all students, not just those who have the knowledge and confidence to seek support. Furthermore feedback on formative assessment provides a vehicle for interaction between students and staff, thus helping to develop student familiarity and confidence to approach staff for additional clarification and guidance if necessary. Feedback information can also be used by staff to realign their teaching in response to learners' needs (see Russell 2008).

### *iii) Relevant courses*

Some institutions are introducing new curriculum areas, which draw on and value a wide range of experiences and knowledge, for example black history, Islamic studies, etc. (Yorke and Thomas 2003). Others are reviewing the existing curriculum to identify assumptions and biases that favour traditional students' knowledge and perspectives at the expense of others (see examples of curriculum change presented in Crosling et al. 2008). Careers education can be integrated into the early stages of students' academic lives to enable them to understand better how the studying they are doing relates to their career aspirations. This can be coupled with greater awareness of employability skills, so that students can prosper in the labour market and overcome some of the biases they face there too (Blasko et al 2003).

### *iv) Personal tutoring and study support*

Work on personal tutoring has drawn on institutional research and evaluation of practice (Thomas and Hixenbaugh 2006). These studies are remarkably consistent in finding that:

- tutoring enhances many students' learning experience and improves retention, progression and success
- traditional models of tutoring are no longer appropriate or fit for purpose
- new models of tutoring should be student-centred, integrated into the curriculum, connected to professional services and proactively engage students, especially as they make the transition into HE
- staff need to be involved in the development of new tutoring systems, and provided with guidance, training and support to enable them to fulfil their new roles, in a wider range of contexts and modes of delivery.

Other research on academic study support also identifies the value of integrated or semi-integrated approaches (see below).

### *v) Flexible learning*

The NAO report (2007) finds that some institutions, and in particular those with higher numbers of non-traditional students, are being flexible in allowing students to choose learning options to fit their personal circumstances, for example through comprehensive modular systems. This approach is recommended by Quinn et al. (2005). Dodgson and Bolam (2002) found that ICT was widely used in the

six universities in the north east of England to improve the flexibility of learning opportunities and enhance student retention. They also note the importance of timetables that try to accommodate students' needs (e.g. blocking time in university and free time, making timetables available well in advance, etc.).

#### **d) Social Engagement**

Harvey and Drew (2006) found that, although social integration is thought to be crucial to student retention and success, it is given comparatively little attention within institutions – for example the forming of friendships and the impact of the locality and its social (non-university) facilities are not considered. In the US context, Tinto has established learning communities that study together and these have promoted social, as well as academic, integration. Thomas et al. (2002) found that student services can play a role in promoting social interaction by “helping students to locate each other (e.g. mature students, international students etc), by providing social spaces, by offering more flexible and affordable accommodation options and by compensating for the informal support usually provided by networks of friends”. Yorke and Longden (2008) also note the importance of accommodation and living arrangements.

#### **e) Student Support**

Student support includes academic support, skills development, pastoral support, financial information, advice and support. Support may be delivered by dedicated, professional staff (e.g. student services), by academic staff (e.g. personal tutor), by peers (e.g. via mentoring schemes) or via the students' union. There are different models of providing both academic and pastoral support: separate, semi-integrated and integrated curriculum models (Warren 2002, Earwaker 1993). Integrated approaches are favoured, as research shows that many students who would benefit from academic and other support services are reluctant to put themselves forward (Dodgson and Bolam, 2002).

Personal tutoring is central to establishing a relationship between students and the institution, and providing a first point of contact (Dodgson and Bolam 2002, Yorke and Thomas 2003, Thomas and Hixenbaugh 2006).

#### **f) Data and monitoring**

Data and monitoring can take place at student, course, department or faculty level. At the student level this includes monitoring, and, crucially, acting on students' attendance as well as identifying students at risk. Institutional data can be reviewed to identify areas with unusually high rates of withdrawal or failure (non-voluntary withdrawal) (NAO 2007). The key issue at all levels however is acting on the data (QAA 2008 and 2006). They identify the following stages that institutions move through:

- **Stage 1** - little or no central provision of data; local sources using different definitions of concepts such as 'progression'; consequently little use is made of data beyond descriptive presentation in annual and periodic review reports.
- **Stage 2** - central systems for handling data and producing reports, but staff may not yet be fully confident in engaging with the data, or completely convinced of the reliability of centrally produced data; analysis consequently still fairly limited, and some local data sources may still be in use.

- **Stage 3** - tools and systems in existence so that staff can obtain the necessary data, and have the appropriate skills to analyse it in an informative manner; however, this facility remains to be fully exploited, generally because of lack of central strategic oversight.
- **Stage 4** - fully integrated management information systems producing data fit for purpose, the analysis of which informs institutional thinking and strategic decision-making at all levels.

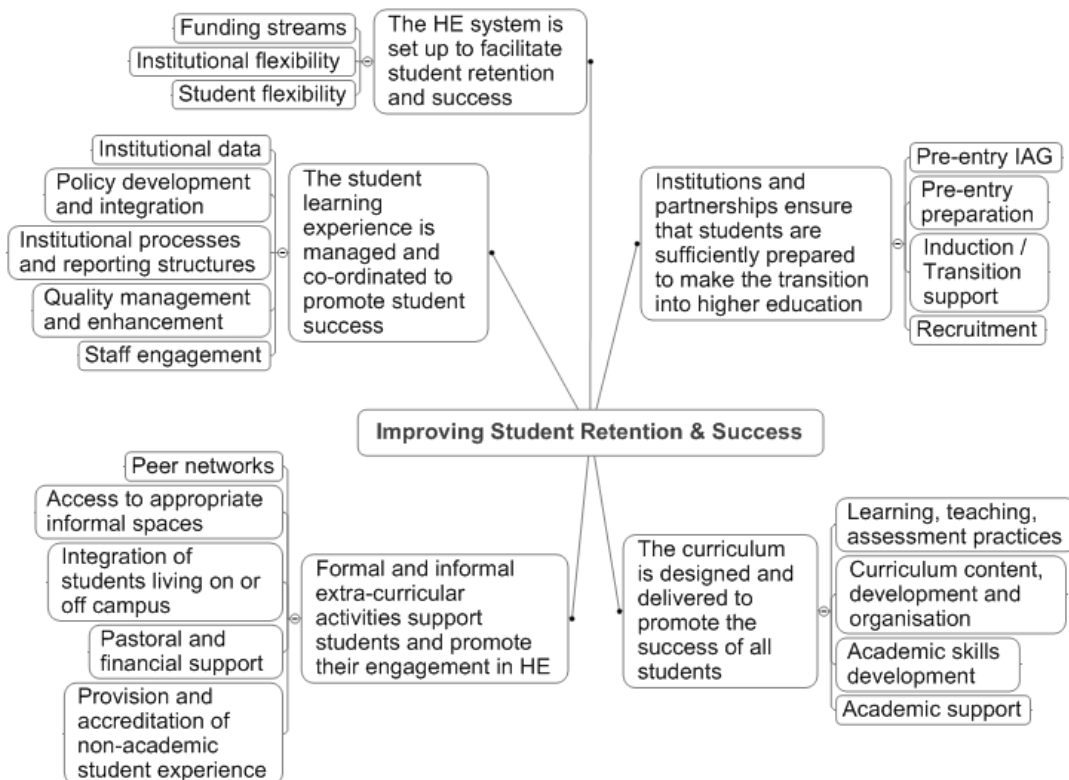
In order to improve the collection and effective use of data, the report recommends:

- a single central source of data in which all staff have confidence
- appropriate tools to enable the data to be interrogated in a manner that meets the needs of different groups within the institution and
- appropriate staff development to support effective use of the data and the analysis tools.

### Improving institutional retention

Using a theory of change, and based on this analysis of the literature, we have identified the essential conditions to improve institutional retention, and used research to suggest ways in which these might be achieved. These are summarised visually below, and then presented as a reflective checklist to assist the institution in considering its strengths and possible areas for attention to improve student retention and success.

#### a) Essential conditions to improve institutional student retention and success



**b) Reflective Checklist**

**1.** Do we, as an institution – directly and through our partnerships - ensure that students are sufficiently prepared to make the transition into higher education (HE)?

Issues to review include:

- 1.1 Pre-entry information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- 1.2 Pre-entry preparation for HE level study
- 1.3 Induction and transition support
- 1.4 Recruitment and admissions processes (including clearing)

**2.** Is the curriculum designed and delivered to promote the success of all students?

Issues to review include:

- 2.1 Learning, teaching and assessment practices
- 2.2 Curriculum content, development and organisation
- 2.3 Academic skills development
- 2.4 Academic support

**3.** Do the formal and informal extra-curricula activities support students and promote the engagement of all students in the HE experience?

Areas to reflect on include:

- 3.1 Peer engagement, friendship, support and learning
- 3.2 Access to appropriate learning and social spaces
- 3.3 Integration of students living both on and off campus
- 3.4 Pastoral and financial support
- 3.5 Provision and accreditation of non-academic student experience to promote engagement

**4.** Is the student learning experience managed and co-ordinated to promote student success?

Issues to consider include:

- 4.1 Policy development and integration
- 4.2 Use of institutional data to identify and support students/modules/courses/departments /faculties
- 4.3 Institutional processes and reporting structures
- 4.4 Staff engagement
- 4.5 Student engagement
- 4.6 Evaluation

**5.** Is the HE system set up to facilitate student retention and success?

Issues to consider include:

- 5.1 Funding and performance review models support institutional flexibility and student choice
- 5.2 Institutions are able to respond flexibly to the needs of diverse students
- 5.3 Students have flexibility and choice, e.g. to move in and out of HE and between HE providers

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