

Retention Grants Programme

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Welcome

The seven What Works? Student Retention and Success programme projects are now in their final phase. The projects are completing their evaluation reports and developing practical tools to enable institutions, programme teams and other practitioners and policy-makers to learn from and use the findings. The final reports and tools will be published in the autumn. The support and co-ordination team is about to start synthesising the evidence from the projects to inform the programme level analysis and a forthcoming publication. The team is also organising the final dissemination conference in March 2012.

This briefing provides an overview of a conceptual model illustrated with examples of how institutions are working to improve student retention and success. The examples both exemplify the model and demonstrate how the conceptual framework can be used to aid understanding of practice and develop it further to embrace other elements. Further details about the examples are available online at:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/retention/retention_illustrative_examples_july2011

What Works? Student Retention and Success Conference 28th and 29th March 2012

The final What Works? Student Retention and Success dissemination conference will take place on Wednesday 28th and Thursday 29th March 2012 at the University of York. The two-day residential conference builds on the successful Retention Convention in March 2010. It will provide keynote addresses from leading experts in the field of student retention and success, findings from the programme as a whole, evidence relating to specific student groups and interventions, practical tools developed by the project teams, and sessions about retention research and interventions from across the UK and beyond. A call for papers will be issued shortly and further information about how to book is available online:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2012/28_29_March_2012_retention_conference

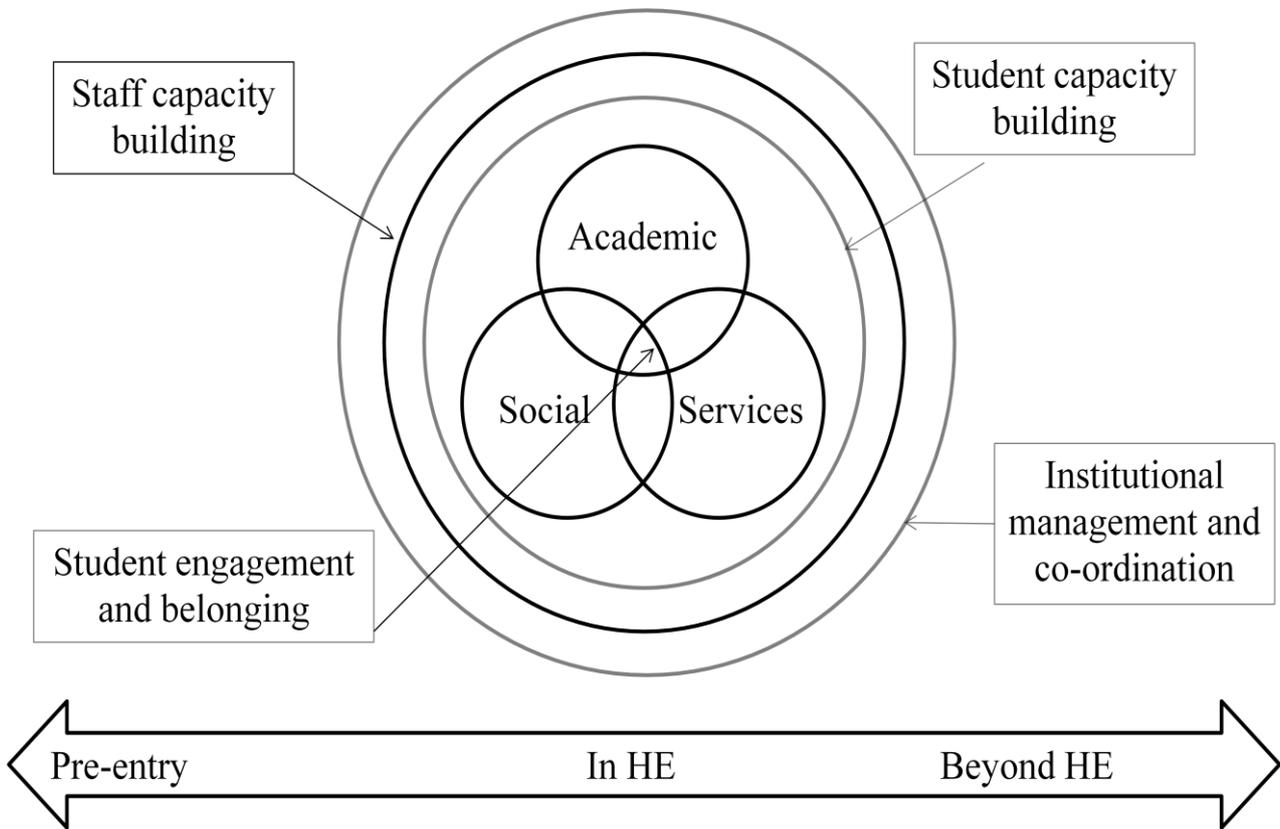
To be kept informed about the conference, please email inclusion@heacademy.ac.uk

Engaging Students to Improve Student Retention and Success in Higher Education

The evidence from the What Works? programme points to the importance of student engagement to enhance retention and success in higher education, indeed student engagement lies at the heart of retention and success. Institutions should consider both the number and range of interventions or services they provide, and the quality and extent of the students' interactions with staff, students, interventions, services and the institution. Successful higher education depends on a partnership between a student, staff and the higher education institution, pre- and post-entry.

The conceptual model in figure 1 below focuses on institutional transformation to enhance student engagement across the institution to improve retention and success. This recognises that a HEI should focus on what is within their control to influence and can only change itself rather than wishing for a more homogenous or traditional student body. The model reflects the importance of providing opportunities for student engagement across the student lifecycle and throughout the institution in the academic, social and professional service spheres. It also recognises that it is essential for students and staff to be enabled to work together, and that an institution needs to manage, co-ordinate, monitor and evaluate student engagement, retention and success.

Figure 1: Student Engagement to Improve Student Retention and Success



Academic Sphere

The academic sphere refers to the organisation, management, content and delivery of academic programmes and is central to the student experience. Engagement in the academic sphere refers to students’ participation in educationally purposeful activities provided by the HEI, in relation to curricula design and contents, curriculum delivery, assessment and feedback and academic development.

Student engagement in the academic sphere entails a move from a teacher-centred paradigm to a learner-centred paradigm in which students construct knowledge through a more active and authentic learning process facilitated by academic staff, rather than relying on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. This constructivist learning paradigm has implications for pedagogy, including group learning, participative activities, feedback and formative assessment¹.

Emerging evidence from the What Works? programme suggests:

- The importance of HEIs providing opportunities for staff and students to build and sustain on-going relationships and dialogue
- The potential for learning and teaching to facilitate peer interaction and the development of friendships

¹ Crosling, G., Thomas, L. & Heagney, M. (eds) 2008, *Improving student retention in higher education*, New York: Routledge Falmer.

- The value of staff gaining an understanding about their student body, including previous experiences, learning preferences and dispositions, and future aspirations
- Providing timely and formative feedback on academic progress and developing students' confidence

Move to Small Teaching Groups

The Business School at the University of Huddersfield has moved from lectures to small seminars to improve student engagement in the academic sphere. This pedagogic model enables students to actively engage with staff and peers through a student-centred approach to teaching. The results from 2002 to 2008 show an increase in attendance, progression to year two and an increase in the average student performance. Qualitative research with students found widespread support for the new model of learning and teaching, the main benefits cited being:

- Ability to question a tutor during a seminar
- A more personal nature of the tutor-student relationship
- A more conducive learning environment

Increasing Engagement in Learning Situations

The University of Hertfordshire has recognised that academic staff can take proactive steps to enable students to engage more effectively in small group learning situations. Research amongst 11 lecturers and around 300 students in the Schools of Education, Humanities and Business found that student behaviour, such as cliquing, dominating, and not contributing, inhibits group learning for home and international students. Interventions were designed and delivered to improve group working and increase student inclusion and engagement:

- Speed meeting (speed dating format) in the first minutes of the first seminar (or two) to unglue cliques
- From a research-based list of 12 negative behaviours (e.g. monopolising, locking eye contact with tutor only, contributing little or nothing) students identify the behaviour they have encountered in seminars. In small groups, students decide what they will do, proactively and compassionately, to address each of these behaviours as it arises. A whole group consensus about the way forward is then reached

These interventions have been embedded by subject tutors into their seminar tasks and transferred across disciplines. Throughout the rest of the seminars, students develop their student to student behaviour.

Qualitative data demonstrates that the interventions have had promising results so far on:

- Group cohesion (contributions from all members of the group)
- Student experience
- Group and individual intellectual output

Engagement in the Feedback Process

The Feedforward project in the School of Nursing at Glyndwr University aims to actively engage tutors and students in the feedback process. The process provides the student with practical advice on how to improve, but it also provides the tutor with valuable information about the student's learning needs in order to respond by re-aligning their teaching and/or referring students for help with student services accordingly. The goal of

the project is to encourage students to engage with tutors written comments on their assessments. This in turn met the overarching outcome as it developed the learners' academic ability through increasing interaction between staff and students. The project was timetabled to allow students sufficient time to reflect upon comments and then act on them before they were assessed. The heart of the project was to allow students to make the connection between assessment and learning. This proactive exercise was planned as a way of reducing anxiety about online assessment and to give students the opportunity to make sense of the written comments on their work by working in partnership with the tutor (Millar et al., 2010). When students understand feedback on how they can improve their work it helps to improve their knowledge and confidence. The project prepared students for their first assessment by informing them on how to close the gap between their actual and required performance. There is both quantitative and qualitative data that demonstrates the effectiveness of Feedforward in student success.

The three examples above illustrate proactive ways in which institutions have sought to actively engage students in the academic sphere. It is important to recognise that students benefit from being helped to engage effectively. This requires change on the part of staff as well as students.

Social Sphere

The social sphere encompasses the provision of formal and informal activities which are not explicitly educationally orientated. Friendship and peer support are critical to many students' decisions to stay in higher education². Institutions can contribute to this by facilitating peer networks, offering free, informal spaces for meeting, organising social and extra-curricula activities (both on and off campus) and accrediting non-academic experiences such as volunteering and part-time employment. These experiences enable students to make friends and engage more widely in the opportunities available, both of which contribute to their success. The academic sphere can play a central role in facilitating students to develop these friendships.

Emerging evidence from the What Works? programme suggests:

- Friends are critical to many students' retention and success
- Students are more likely to turn to friends and family for support than academic staff, service staff or institutional support systems
- The academic sphere can play a central role in facilitating students to develop these friendships, especially for those who spend less time on campus
- Technology can facilitate social networking between students, particularly those based away from the main campus
- Friendship groups formed early in the student experience are enduring

Developing Peer Networks

Swansea Metropolitan University is setting up two new interventions designed to assist students to develop peer networks in the early phases of their student journey. Heads Up! allows students to start meeting peers and socialising in a virtual context before they arrive at university. The Recognising Helping scheme offers applicants who have

² Thomas, L 2002, 'Student Retention in Higher Education: The role of institutional habitus', *Journal of Education Policy*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 423-432.

Wilcox, P, Winn, S. and Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005) 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people: the role of social support in the first year experience of higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 30, no. 6, pp. 707-722.

accepted a place at the University the opportunity to have an existing student as a 'buddy' who can provide friendship, peer support and information about the University. This relationship can be formally maintained throughout the new student's first year to ease the transition and engender a sense of entitlement and belonging. Both of these are new interventions, but they offer students a semi-structured way of making new friends when entering higher education, which are likely to support them in and beyond the early days. Further details are available from:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/retention/EngagingStudentsToImproveRetention_final_English.pdf

Fostering Meaningful Interaction

The School of Engineering at Cardiff University has introduced Design, Make and Test social evenings. The school has large cohorts of students and makes significant use of lectures as a teaching approach, so there is a risk of isolation for some students, particularly in the early stages of their courses. The main aim of the events is social rather than academic; groups of students are set engineering problems, but they do not require any input from the students' courses. These fun group activities, with refreshments and prizes, nurture supportive peer relations, help to foster meaningful interaction between staff and students and engender a sense of entitlement and belonging in higher education. Further details are available from:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/retention/EngagingStudentsToImproveRetention_final_English.pdf

Targeted Induction and Social Networking Activities

Mature students at the University of Essex identified in a focus group that they wanted more specifically targeted induction and social networking activities. The University put in place a number of activities specifically for mature students, including:

- A residential pre-enrolment event
- Peer mentoring for mature students
- A freshers' week reception
- Reinvigorating the mature students' society
- Electronic communications to keep students engaged and informed

Qualitative feedback from students has been very positive and there has been a reduction in the number of mature students withdrawing, which is now the lowest it has been for five years.

Peer Mentoring for International Students

The Business School at Coventry University is introducing peer mentoring for international students to develop social networks and improve student satisfaction and success. The pilot study was evaluated in 2010 using quantitative analysis of coursework marks together with qualitative research in the form of questionnaires and a focus group with a sample of students (including students who used a mentor and also those that did not). The preliminary findings indicated that students who had a peer mentor achieved higher student satisfaction and academic achievement in comparison with students who did not have a mentor.

The four examples above demonstrate the importance of social interaction particularly for students who, for one reason or another, may feel isolated or less connected with the institution. Interventions can take place pre- or post-entry but are particularly valuable

near the beginning of programmes, as these groups can then sustain students through the challenges of transition and beyond.

Professional Service Sphere

The professional service sphere refers to the range of professional services that students engage with over the course of the student lifecycle and their programme of study. These include student services, the library, learning services, disability services, careers services, marketing and recruitment, admissions, widening participation units, the students' union, amongst others. They play a key role in developing students' capacities and identities as successful learners and graduates, by providing information, advice and guidance, access to resources, skills enhancement, and personal and professional development. There are different models of provision and delivery, some service provision is integrated into academic departments (i.e. academic sphere), whilst others are provided centrally; some proactively seek to build ongoing relationships, while others respond to student queries based on staff availability.

Emerging findings from the What Works? programme suggests:

- Relationship-building is important to student success, irrespective of where the service is located
- Students value having access to a range of internal and external sources of support, particularly when they are experiencing difficulties
- The impact of professional services can be increased by working in partnership with academic programmes
- Professional services play a key role in promoting students' pre-entry engagement with the institution

Personal Tutoring

The Institute of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Worcester has recognised the value of personal tutoring in supporting the engagement, retention and success of PE students. The intervention consisted of an individual meeting between a PE tutor and a PE student. First-year students were allocated an academic tutor from within their pathway and a meeting was scheduled toward the end of semester two. They were required to complete a reflection sheet as a starting point to support the discussion. Tutors had access to academic attainment information and also intended module choices for year two of the course. The meeting concluded with target setting designed to give the students a clearer focus on what they needed to do in order to maximise their full potential. The evaluation found that 90% of all targeted students attended the meeting and progression to Level 5 was 100% for 'Major' PE students, considerably higher than the overall completion rate of 84% for all Level 4 students within the institute. In addition, external examiner reports for 2009-11 have been extremely positive.

Student Support

The Open University has trialled a subject-based collaborative team approach to student support, involving academics and professional service staff. Teams of faculty and student services staff have offered proactive, ongoing, timely and relevant teaching and support services for students and trialled the development of a new management information profiling and tracking system which brings together all the information held about students on one system. This information has been combined with curriculum-specific module and programme milestones to proactively monitor and contact students when they fail to meet a key learning activity or have certain personal characteristics. The development of this new management information system allows the teams to deliver a more immediate and

proactive service to students studying at a distance, which can recognise and respond to the diversity of student learning needs both at a personal level and at a curriculum level. As a result of the trials, student success has increased and interactions between staff and students have become much more meaningful, in particular they are more personalised and timely because they are tailored to the individual student in question. This approach has enabled the trials to identify new students who are not engaging early on with their studies and do not feel as if they belong to the institution. The use of management information has allowed staff to easily identify and contact students requiring additional support and redirect students requiring support from elsewhere in a large and complex institution as well as deliver more curriculum-specific information, advice, guidance and support.

The two examples above show the importance of student development and support having a connection with the academic sphere, and the importance of enabling students and staff to develop relationships.

Centrality of the Academic Sphere

Many students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds spend less time in higher education institutions than their peers because they have other commitments such as family, employment and community, and are more exclusively focused on academic achievement. Evidence suggests they are less likely to engage with student services³ and with careers services⁴, and often have friends and support networks outside of higher education. The academic sphere can play a central role in facilitating students to develop friendships and facilitate in interaction with professional services, as noted above.

Peer-Assisted Learning

The BSc in Mathematics at Sheffield Hallam University uses peer-assisted learning (PAL) to enable first year students to develop academic and group-working skills, and relationships with peers, the PAL leader and their tutor. PAL leaders (final year students) are trained to facilitate students to develop their team-working skills through collaborative projects. At the end of the first semester each group presents a poster, an oral presentation and a written report. Staff and student feedback identifies positive benefits for first year students, especially with regard to nurturing supportive peer relations and meaningful interaction with staff. PAL leaders develop a range of personal and professional skills which will support their progression beyond their undergraduate programme of study. Staff have reported that the initiative helps to foster a learning community and an associated sense of entitlement and belonging in higher education.

Personal Development Planning

Personal development planning (PDP) in the Biological Sciences department at the University of Worcester is compulsory. It has been developed to:

- Make better use of the opportunities provided by personal tutorials, including giving the individual support needed to increase retention and achievement

³ Dodgson, R. and Bolam, H. (2002) *Student retention, support and widening participation in the North East of England*, Universities for the North East, available from: www.unis4ne.ac.uk/unew/projectsadditionalfiles/wp/retention_report.pdf

⁴ Hills, J. (2003) *Stakeholder perceptions of the employability of non-traditional students*, London: London Metropolitan University, available from: <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/employability/projects/gem/publication/home.cfm>

- Help students to reflect on the skills that they need to develop in order to attain the next step within their degree
- Prepare for employment

The scheme has many strands but an important aspect in terms of retention is that personal tutorials have been made compulsory. In all degrees within the sciences all students take certain mandatory modules and so the scheme was linked to a learning outcome in some modules. One assessment item became 'attendance at two personal tutorials each semester' and failure to attend results in failure of that module. This proactive, inclusive and integrated approach allows tutors to provide the support and advice needed by each individual student at that particular time and is therefore relevant, flexible, on-going and timely. The requirements of the scheme are detailed in the module outlines given to each student which gives transparency to the scheme. As well as keeping records of tutorials, personal tutors sign an attendance sheet at each tutorial which the student then hands in to enable a pass or fail grade to be given for that assignment. This enables student engagement to be easily monitored. Although evidence that this scheme helps retention is anecdotal at present, the mandatory personal tutorial aspect of the science PDP scheme is seen as so beneficial to the students that it is about to be introduced across the whole University.

Senior Academic Support Tutors

In the School of Human Sciences at Newman University College there is a team of Senior Academic Support Tutors (SAST) who act as a bridge between students, academic processes and support services. The process begins by inviting all single, combined or joint honours students onto the two week HEADstart pre-entry course facilitated by SAST. It is designed to provide activities that are relevant to their subject, building robust, supportive peer and staff relationships through fostering a sense of entitlement and belonging in higher education. SAST encourage collaboration and engagement in student success and progression between academic and professional colleagues, as well as between staff and students. Throughout the years and levels, SAST conduct activities around personal development planning, facilitating both 'feedback and review' meetings and personal development planning reviews to develop student's knowledge, confidence and identity as successful higher education learners. In addition, SAST are available in a central location for student drop-in Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm. They offer flexibility to meet by appointment in the evening or at the weekends, communicating online, by mobile and landline telephone and face to face. Data about re-sits and completions for the first year is positive, as is students' qualitative feedback about the service.

A Partnership: Developing Student and Staff Capacity to Engage

Institutions should consider working with students to develop their capacity to engage effectively. This includes developing students':

- Understanding of the value of engagement in all spheres of the institution
- Skills and capacities to engage and take responsibility for a fulfilling and successful student experience
- Opportunities at different levels throughout the institution for engagement

Capacity to engage may be developed in many ways including being integrated into the academic curriculum, being included as part of the induction process, or being aligned to the student experience.

Graduate Development Programme

The University of the West of England offers a Graduate Development Programme (GDP) to all undergraduate students to make explicit those practices and experiences of higher education that are often implicit. It comprises of a set of principles, practices and support activities aimed at retention, progression and employability as well as supporting cohort identity and transition. The programme is managed via faculty and departments but is centrally supported and co-ordinated. Student groups of fifteen are timetabled with a member of academic staff from their award. There are twelve one hour meetings at level one, eight at level two and four at level three. Staff are trained in facilitation and reflection and encouraged to negotiate session content to meet the needs of students from a wide range of programmes and backgrounds. Completion of GDP is achieved by the submission of both a 500-word piece of reflective writing and attendance at a minimum of 75% of sessions at each level. Over 90% of undergraduates are aware of the programme, and in any one year around 5,000 students complete a level. Statistical analysis of the programme retention and completion data indicates a positive association with a gain in module marks of between four and twelve percentage points. There is a statistically valid correlation between participation in GDP and the gaining of sufficient credit to progress between levels at the first attempt.

Tutor Feedback

Providing hyperlinks in feedback in Religious Studies and History at the University of Wolverhampton is intended to help students act on and therefore get more out of tutor feedback by taking them to specific electronic sources to aid their understanding and/or development. The intervention is applied by tutors during marking by selecting appropriate hyperlinks to enable student to follow up one or more comments made in feedback. These hyperlinks are set out in a chart for tutors and all they need to do is select, copy and paste the appropriate introductory comment hyperlink into their feedback. The hyperlinks fall into three main types of material: reminders of aspects of academic writing that are essential for clear communication; the opportunity to undertake online tutorials/activities to develop the required proficiency in academic writing; and exemplars to show students examples of good practice, particularly in areas such as referencing. This intervention develops students' capacity to engage with tutor feedback. Electronic marking generally ensures that students receive the feedback on their work, but because it is returned electronically this requires minimal effort by the student. This encourages a more active response. Student responses to the inclusion of hyperlinks in tutor feedback have been very encouraging with 100% of those surveyed stating that they followed up the links to explore areas for development. This figure is encouraging as past initiatives directing students to study skills books or skills tutors met with only limited success with less than 10% of students admitting to following up suggestions.

Traffic Light Self Assessment Tool

A Traffic Light Self Assessment Tool for nursing students at the University of Derby enables students to self identify problems affecting their progression early in the programme so that multi-level supportive interventions can be 'signposted' and the support implemented. The objectives of the trial were to:

- To develop a 'traffic light' system to enable student nurses to assess and act on their own learning support needs by working with the Student Well-being Service and the Student Experience Team to produce an interactive tool
- To test the viability of providing an online menu of learning support activities for student nurses to access during their common foundation programme. This was on

all module platforms within Blackboard allowing 24 hour access to the tool and evaluated using a lime survey

Usage has been tracked on the Blackboard platform and through the lime survey. Attrition has improved and access to support mechanisms has taken place earlier in the programme. Students' comments following use of the tool included:

"We know support is there but we don't know how to find it...we do now."

"Don't know where to go for support - this helps us quickly."

"Can't navigate the systems in the University - this is streamlined and so easy to use any time."

"We want easy access to finding support."

The tool was well received and future developments will enable it to be implemented across the faculty in July 2011, with particular reference to students engaging in distance learning and e-learning programmes.

Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Staff in the Business School at Coventry University believe it is important to make students aware of self-efficacy and the impact that their individual beliefs can have on their engagement, degree classification and ultimately their employability⁵. To address any potentially problematic self-efficacy beliefs amongst students, they are developing a tailored self efficacy questionnaire which students would be asked to complete and mark themselves as part of induction activities. This will be followed up through a group research project about self-efficacy beliefs. These interventions are intended to raise awareness of self-efficacy and demonstrate the value of helpful self-efficacy beliefs. Additionally, students whose initial questionnaire results suggest particularly unhelpful self-efficacy beliefs will be monitored and, where appropriate, signposted to seek out further support and guidance.

Developing engagement opportunities throughout the institution and across the student lifecycle requires all staff to be involved, rather than a few committed individuals. All staff need to understand their responsibility for, and role in, improving student retention and success, and provided with appropriate information, support, resource and incentives to do this. Institutions could consider how policies and procedures can ensure staff responsibility, accountability, development, and recognition and reward enable all staff to fulfil their obligations with respect to promoting student engagement. This will include the alignment of institutional strategies, human resource policies, staff development and senior leadership to promote and enable staff (and student) engagement.

Appreciative Inquiry

The University of Worcester recognised that staff can feel demoralised by and resistant to critical review; they used an appreciative inquiry approach to find out from students what was working well within the institution. Through a questionnaire students were asked to give positive feedback only on the following areas: quality of teaching; assessment and

⁵ Yorke, M. and Knight, P. (2007) 'Evidence-informed pedagogy and the enhancement of student employability', *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 157-170

feedback; organisation and management of their course; learning resources and personal development. The questionnaire comprised six sections and requested only qualitative data. Each section allowed for three positive statements and one which would provide an even better experience. One outcome of the study was to reinforce how much emphasis students place on the importance of the relationship with the lecturer, especially in the areas of teaching, assessment and feedback, and personal development.

Other examples of ways in which staff are enabled to facilitate student engagement and provide appropriate opportunities include:

- Making additional funding available to enable staff to develop and implement new initiatives
- Recruiting staff with the skills and experience to engage students and teach inclusively
- Providing data and information about students to assist staff in providing appropriate opportunities for their students
- Using interactive activities to enable staff to get to know their students as individuals and use this information to inform their engagement with students

Engaging Students across the Student Lifecycle

A focus on engagement prioritises the importance of the development of relationships. Pre-entry interventions to facilitate early engagement allow students to begin developing their relationship with the institution, staff and peers as soon as possible. Pre-entry engagement can also be used to ensure that students are ready and able to begin learning as soon as the programme starts. In addition, as students get to know the institution they are more likely to know where to go to access additional information, advice and guidance, and develop their confidence to seek out help. Early engagement includes institutional outreach interventions and extends throughout the process of preparing for and entering higher education and supporting their transition.

Early Engagement and Better Preparation

The Faculty of Health at Edge Hill University introduced coffee mornings for pre-registration nursing students prior to them commencing their programme of study, to encourage them to meet with fellow peers, build relationships and enhance cohort identity prior to enrolment. The initiative has been disseminated across the faculty with many programmes now holding coffee mornings or afternoon tea for students prior to commencing their studies. These events also provide the prospective students with an overview of the programme, reading lists, first week timetable and they have the opportunity to meet with tutors who will be teaching them in their first module. There are also talks from the student union, student finance team and the inclusion team. There is also the opportunity to discuss Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) declarations and occupational health checks. Documentation is given to candidates and they are told how to complete it and by when. This has led to a reduction in the number of students who have their practice placement and full registration delayed due to incomplete or late CRB and occupational health clearance. Feedback from students has highlighted many benefits of this initiative, these include financial awareness and budgeting, meeting their peers and academic staff, being more aware of their programme of study and time management. In addition, the number of students who have withdrawn from the programme has declined, which may, at least in part, be due to early engagement and better preparation.

Engaging Direct Entrant Students

Edinburgh Napier University recognised the importance of engaging direct entrant students entering second or third year of university following completion of HNC or HND courses at a further education college via one-day orientation workshops. Signposts to Success is a set of one day orientation workshops delivered the week before direct entrants begin their studies. The workshops are designed to support students in making the transition from college to Edinburgh Napier. Currently there are three distinct Signposts workshops, for students entering Nursing, Midwifery & Complementary Healthcare, Sport & Exercise Science and Business degrees. Invitations are sent to all students joining one of these courses with a relevant Access, HNC or HND qualification. In 2010/11, 149 (out of about 500) students attended Signposts. Over the last six years, students attending these workshops have consistently identified the key benefits as: the opportunity to meet with other direct entry students and start building their own support networks; familiarising themselves with key academic skills (e.g. referencing, academic writing, critical thinking); gaining awareness of central sources of support; engaging with the academic culture within the University; and identifying ways of developing existing skills. However, the most effective activity in Signposts is the use of current students as co-facilitators who can share their experiences and offer advice to new students. Student evaluations of the workshop have consistently shown the majority ($\geq 80\%$) of students find the workshops useful and feel more confident about starting their degree courses after attending.

It is equally important to engage students throughout their higher education experience and help them to appreciate the ways in which their learning will assist them to achieve their future aspirations.

Extra-Curricula Employability Programme

The University of Westminster has developed a new extra-curricula employability programme, targeted at Level 4 and 5 undergraduates. It is designed to enhance student retention, progression and success by:

- Delivering tailored one-to-one careers coaching and progress monitoring
- Developing career goals and engaging students in career planning from an early stage of the undergraduate programme
- Developing the relevant 'soft' skills currently in high demand by graduate employers and establishing improved understandings of the world of work
- Requiring regular and active participation in career development events (e.g. employability skills workshops, employer networking and volunteering events, job fairs)
- Providing customised careers training delivered in collaboration with internal teams (e.g. Microsoft Office specialist training) and external partners
- Enabling students to acquire paid work or voluntary experience and acquire a position of responsibility in a relevant organisation

Students are required to develop independent learning skills by accruing points for participating in a four stage programme (preparation, skills development activities, work experience, and reflection) designed to build self-confidence and self-efficacy in relation to making the transition to the graduate labour market. The award is delivered flexibly alongside the undergraduate curriculum and is supported by a dedicated virtual learning environment (VLE) designed in partnership with the Online Learning Team. The VLE includes an e-portfolio and a dedicated Blackboard site, as well as being integrated into the CDC online events/vacancy listing system. The pilot stage of the award was launched

in January 2011. Twenty six students were successfully enrolled (including a number of reserved places for vocational entrants to university) via a competitive recruitment process requiring completion of a self-diagnostic application form. The pilot has been evaluated, with participating students finding it useful.

Managing Engagement: Institutional Responsibility

At the senior level the institution must take responsibility for managing and promoting student engagement to enhance retention and success. This includes building engagement into the corporate mission, vision and plan and aligning institutional policies towards this priority; providing leadership which explicitly values student engagement throughout the whole institution and across the student lifecycle and promotes whole staff responsibility for engagement; and the development of a co-ordinated, evidence-informed strategy with explicit indicators and measures of success. In summary, managing engagement involves:

- Provision of a range of opportunities for engagement of different types, at different levels and across the institution in different sites throughout the student lifecycle
- Developing students to recognise the importance of engagement and to have the capacity to engage in a range of opportunities
- Developing staff responsibility for and capacity to provide effective engagement opportunities
- Taking responsibility for engagement, including monitoring engagement and acting when there are indicators of lower levels of engagement
- Creating a partnership between students and institutions towards a shared outcome of successful learners and graduates

Intelligent Personal Tutoring System

Loughborough University has introduced Co-Tutor, an intelligent personal tutoring system which provides staff with a wide range of information to assist decision-making and interventions to improve student retention and progression. Co-Tutor is a student and staff relationship management system and is used by academic staff and administrators to communicate with and manage personal tutees, project students, industrial placement activities, postgraduate research supervision and course cohorts. It is a large PHP/MySQL web application with interfaces to the University's student information system, attendance monitoring software and the Moodle virtual learning environment. Co-Tutor is now used by departmental management to monitor the contact and interaction between staff and students, including attendance at lectures, tutorials and meetings, and an archive for email communication. It is also used as an invaluable resource after students have graduated. Academics can enter information as free text or pre-defined statements and tags. As well as comments, Co-Tutor contains important metrics on student welfare, progression and attendance. It has been used successfully to support academics when students enter claims for impaired performance. Co-Tutor provides staff with a targeted system that integrates institutional data and external sources of information in order to make better-informed decisions of 'at risk' students and help the progression of all students. It supports a pro-active interventionist approach so that an effective and supportive relationship between staff and students is built up.

Monitoring Performance - Traffic Light System

The School of Pharmacy at the University of Bradford has recognised the importance of monitoring the engagement and performance of all students through a traffic light system. Immediately after the release of the semester one examination results all students on the BSc in Pharmaceutical Management receive a letter coded green (passed all examinations), amber (likely to have supplementary assessment in August) or red (certain to have supplementary assessments in August) depending on how 'at risk' they are in relation to progression to the next stage of the course or to receive their award. All students irrespective of their traffic light status are invited to meet their personal or year tutor to discuss their performance. However, any stage one student that receives an amber or red letter is encouraged to meet the course leader and appointments are made for a date and time that fits around their timetable. Incoming students are informed about the traffic light process and its function during induction. The main purposes are essentially to check for any unreported reasons that may have interfered with their performance, to encourage them to continue to engage with the modules in semester two in order to reduce their 'at risk' status, to provide advice about any specific support that may be needed and to remind them about the academic regulations and how they are implemented. Further meetings are arranged as necessary and a similar follow up is provided after the semester two examinations.

The impact of this system seems to be positive. In the first year of operation, across the three stages of the BSc course, all students that received a green letter progressed to the next stage or received their award. More than 85% (86.4%) of students who received an amber letter progressed to the next stage or received their award whilst 46.7% of those students receiving a red letter were successful. Only one student withdrew from the course at stage one. Furthermore, verbal feedback from students and comments on the end of stage questionnaires, suggests that students appreciated the opportunity to discuss the issues surrounding their examination performance, it gave them a clearer indication of the situation they may be facing at the Board of Examiners meeting in July and what they needed to do to remedy it.

Mitigating Circumstances Procedure

Roehampton University has introduced a centrally co-ordinated mitigating circumstances procedure which engages students more actively in managing their assessments and taking responsibility for their performance. Administrative and academic staff at the departmental level engage with students to help them plan their workloads more effectively, identify where they need additional time to meet deadlines and encourage them to make decisions about what they need to succeed. As a consequence, the student body has become better informed of the support available to them and individuals have taken greater responsibility for the management of their assessment workloads by engaging with the process and requesting appropriate support and resources earlier on in their studies.

In addition, all data from the requests is stored centrally and regularly monitored along with attendance statistics. Students who appear to be struggling are identified early on and highlighted to personal tutors, academic learning advisors or programme convenors to ensure support can be offered if necessary. The introduction of the new procedure has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of students deferring assessments, and is thought to have contributed to the steady rise in retention rates at the University.

Student Tracking System

The School of Biological Sciences at the University of Plymouth introduced a student tracking system in September 2004 to monitor stage one student attendance at practical classes and tutorials and follow up those missing assessments. The non-attending students were contacted by emails and letters via their personal tutors and the school office with a view to identifying students with personal problems who could be helped or those who had not engaged with the course and could also be given support to attend. This system was also extended to stage two students. The results showed that even though many of these students were found to have serious undeclared personal problems, which had not been claimed as extenuating circumstances, approximately 60% of the monitored students passed on to stage two. The system could also be seen to work well for students with poor attendance but no extenuating circumstances since a high proportion responded to a 'missed tutorial' email and attended the next session. The tracking system, while not preventing the very difficult cases of poor motivation or serious extenuating circumstances, is proving useful in showing that these students can be identified and helped at an earlier stage. This gives them the opportunity to recover to some extent by the end of the first year. Indeed, despite large increases in student numbers over the last five years (261 in 2007/08 to 400 in 2010/11) student progression from stage one to stage two has remained relatively stable at 84% to 85% over these years. It is believed that the student tracking scheme intervention has helped to keep progression rates stable during this expansion.

Practical Implications for Institutions

The What Works? project teams have been investigating the effectiveness of a range of interventions. The empirical research suggests that the exact type of engagement opportunity is less important than the way it is offered and its intended outcomes. Interventions should aim to achieve some or all of the following outcomes:

1. Nurture supportive peer relations
2. Foster meaningful interaction between staff and students
3. Develop students' knowledge, confidence and identity as successful higher education learners
4. Encourage in-depth engagement by being relevant to students' interests and future goals

Together these outcomes contribute to engendering a sense of entitlement and belonging in higher education for students. The examples given in this briefing exhibit many or all of these outcomes and on the whole they also show an awareness of the most appropriate ways to deliver interventions to maximise these outcomes. The What Works? programme analysis suggests that to achieve these outcomes engagement activities in all spheres should be planned and informed by the following principles.

Proactive: Activities should proactively seek to engage students, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur, or the more motivated students to take up opportunities.

Inclusive: Activities should be aimed at engaging all students. This may mean thinking about the circumstances that constrain some individuals to engage in some activities throughout the institution.

Flexible: Activities need to be delivered sufficiently flexibly to facilitate the participation of all students. This will include consideration of timing and time commitment, as well as location and accessibility.

Transparent: The ways in which students are expected or able to engage in an activity should be transparent, and the potential benefits of engaging should be explicit.

Ongoing: Activities tend to benefit from taking place over time, rather than one-off opportunities, as engagement takes time (e.g., to develop skills and build relationships).

Timely: Activities should be available at appropriate times, for example, students' need for engagement in the social and service activities will change over time.

Relevant: Activities need to be relevant to students' interests and aspirations.

Integrated: Opportunities for engagement in all spheres should be integrated into core activities that students are required to do, i.e. in the academic sphere.

Collaborative: Activities should encourage collaboration and engagement with fellow students and members of staff.

Monitored: The extent and quality of students' engagement should be monitored, and where there is evidence of low levels of engagement follow-up action should be taken.

To achieve these outcomes institutions need to encourage and facilitate partnerships between staff and students, which are based on a shared understanding of, and responsibility for, engagement and success. This will involve winning hearts and minds and creating an appropriate institutional infrastructure.

Moving Forward: A Strategy for Student Engagement, Retention and Success

This informal selection of interventions and approaches to improve student retention and success provides a useful set of examples that illustrate many of the tenets of the conceptual model of using student engagement to improve retention and success. While most of the examples embrace a range of elements of the conceptual model, others appear to focus on specific interventions at specific points of the student lifecycle, which are not necessarily joined up with other activities across the institution. To maximise the impact on student retention and success, institutions may find it helpful to move beyond the provision of a range of opportunities to enable student engagement towards a more strategic approach.

An institutional strategy for improving student retention and success could usefully include the following elements:

Multiple Engagement Opportunities: Institutions should provide multiple opportunities for students to engage across the student lifecycle.

Interaction of Engagement Opportunities: Institutions should take a holistic view to ensure alignment of opportunities with the curriculum as well as across the student lifecycle, the institution and the range and type of opportunities provided at any given time.

Build Students' Capacity to Engage: Institutions can help students to recognise and make the most of the opportunities on offer.

Promote Staff Responsibility for Student Engagement: Institutions can develop staff responsibility for, and capacity to, provide effective engagement opportunities.

Monitoring Student Engagement: Institutions should monitor student engagement and take action to promote further engagement.

Evaluating Impact: Institutions should build in measures to evaluate the impact of their engagement opportunities.

Institutions should seek to develop a coherent strategic approach to student engagement which incorporates these key elements and aims to achieve the key outcomes list above, overall aiming to improve all students' sense of entitlement and belonging in higher education.

Useful Information

About the Programme

A total of £1 million has been made available by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) over a three-year period to support projects that identify, evaluate and disseminate institutional good practice relating to student retention. The primary purpose of the programme is to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation, and sector-wide dissemination, of learning about the most effective strategies to ensure high continuation and completion rates within higher education.

Following a competitive process, seven projects involving over 20 institutions, were funded. Through their support for the programme, the PHF and HEFCE aim to achieve the following outcomes:

- The identification, evaluation and sharing of institutional good practice in student retention and its dissemination across the sector, with an emphasis on collaborative approaches where appropriate
- To build the evidence base for successful student retention practice
- To improve the quality of student retention practice in institutions
- To provide additional recognition for improvements in student retention work

To find out more about the What Works? programme please visit the website:

www.actiononaccess.org/retention

Join the Student Retention and Success Network to enable you to keep in touch with the Support and Co-ordination Team, to share your knowledge across the sector and to support the work you are doing in this area. Please send your name and email address to info@actiononaccess.org with 'Retention Network' in the subject line to register. This will also ensure you receive these six monthly briefings.

In 2010 we established a Community of Engagement to test the emerging models and tools from the programme. Further tools to assist institutions will be available as outputs

of the programme. If you are interested in using or testing out the conceptual model, or further tools generated by the individual projects we would be pleased to hear from you (inclusion@heacademy.ac.uk).

Calendar of Events

7 September 2011 – Policy seminar on the HE White Paper – Adult and Part-time students at the heart of the system: Exploring the impact of the white paper – NIACE, Leicester

<http://www.niace.org.uk/campaigns-events/events/policy-seminar-on-the-he-white-paper-pm>

9 September 2011 – Engaging people, enhancing performance: wellbeing and engagement for challenging times, Equality Challenge Unit, Leeds

<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/events/engaging-people-enhancing-performance-wellbeing-and-engagement-for-challenging-times>

15 September 2011 – RAISE Conference 2011: Engaging students in challenging times, Nottingham

<http://raise-network.ning.com/events/inaugural-conference>

15 September 2011 – Access to Higher Education: Raising levels of attainment; widening participation, Neil Stewart Associates, London

<http://www.neilstewartassociates.com/jb309/>

20 September 2011 – Learning to Teach Inclusively Conference, Wolverhampton

<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/Default.aspx?page=26713>

2 – 5 October 2011 – NACADA Annual Conference, Denver, Colorado

<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/annualconf/2011/index.htm>

12 October 2011 – Part time, distance and flexible study in Higher Education – A new deal for part-time and distance students? Neil Stewart Associates, London

<http://www.neilstewartassociates.com/jb312/>

8 – 9 November 2011 – European Gender Summit, Brussels

<http://www.gender-summit.eu/>

15 November 2011 – Enhancing the Student Experience 2011, Neil Stewart Associates, London

<http://www.neilstewartassociates.com/jb308/>

Contact Details

Organisation or Project	Name	Phone	Email
Support and Co-ordination Team	Liz Thomas	07779600231	lthomas@phf.org.uk
1. Dispositions to stay: the support and evaluation of retention strategies using the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory	Jamie Thompson	0191 437256	jamie.thompson@northumbria.ac.uk
2. Pathways to success through peer mentoring	Jane Andrews	01212043363	j.e.andrews@aston.ac.uk
3. A comparative evaluation of the roles of student adviser and personal tutor in relation to undergraduate student retention	Jacqui McCary	01223363271 Ext. 2330	jacqui.mccary@anglia.ac.uk
4. HERE! Higher education retention & engagement	Ed Foster	01158488203	ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk
5. Good practice in student retention: an examination of the effects of student integration on non-completion	Anne Boyle	01915153667	anne.boyle@sunderland.ac.uk
6. 'Belonging' & 'intimacy' factors in the retention of students - an investigation into student perceptions of effective practice and how that practice can be replicated	Annette Cashmore or Jon Scott	0116 252 3439/3319 0116 252 3083	pmj7@le.ac.uk mjp26@le.ac.uk
7. Comparing and evaluating the impacts on student retention of different approaches to supporting students through study advice and personal development	Sarah Morey or Sue Robbins	01865 484192	s.morey@reading.ac.uk srobbins@brookes.ac.uk
Higher Education Funding Council for England	Victoria Waite or Sian Griffiths	0117 931 7254 0117 931 7153	v.waite@hefce.ac.uk s.griffiths@hefce.ac.uk
Paul Hamlyn Foundation	Denise Barrows	0207 2273527	dbarrows@phf.org.uk