

Paul Hamlyn
Foundation



What Works? Student Retention & Success

Two-day Retention Convention

Wednesday 3rd & Thursday 4th March 2010

Parallel Sessions Descriptions and Abstracts

DAY ONE

Session One- Papers and Workshop

Option One- Papers: Early Transition Support

Flying Start Transition Support Programme

Matthew Hunt and Amanda Foster, Sheffield Hallam University

Presenter: Matthew Hunt

In 2005 a Business Analysis Group convened within Sheffield Business School to review and evaluate issues raised through LTA forums and internal WP transition support research relating to student transition and retention, particularly within the first semester at level 4. Concerns were raised in relation to settling into the university, adapting to new modes of learning and teaching, not developing relationships with peers and staff and a lack of student engagement with their course. Research within the school in 2004 and 2005 reflected the outcomes of national research (Yorke; 1999) investigating common themes for withdrawal in the first year of study. One of the key recommendations the working group proposed resulted in a pilot programme of timetabled transition support activities delivered to first year students in 07/8.

The Flying Start programme frontloads six timetabled sessions around key academic themes of personal development planning and creative and analytical thinking in to semester one of the first year to facilitate the academic and personal transition into higher education.

The aims of the programme are to; raise attainment, support transition from further education, enhance the retention of students into the second year of study and build support structures through peer networking.

The Impact of Good Selection of Students on Retention

Mary Crawford, King's College London

This paper will explore the relationship between selection and retention, examining entry qualifications and their influence on successful completion. The author's experience is from nursing but delegates will bring experiences across the sector for discussion.

If the characteristics necessary for nursing are identified, applicants with the potential to succeed may be selected, thus reducing attrition. In nursing many students come from diverse educational backgrounds; selection on academic grounds alone is not sufficient to predict retention on and successful completion of the programme. In the author's institution the mean age of students entering nursing programmes is 30 years of age; mature students bring family and financial responsibilities which may impact upon their ability to concentrate on their studies. In contrast, however, mature students are also a group who have high successes. Returning to studying after a break can lead to anxiety and this group of students may require a higher level of support, especially in areas such as e- learning. Programmes to help mature students settle into their studies may impact positively upon attrition. These may also help identify those students who are "at risk", enabling coping strategies to be put in place, thus retaining students on the programme.

Option Two- Workshop

The Effects of Student Integration on Non-Completion

Anne Boyle, University of Sunderland

This project is a collaboration between the Universities of Hull, Newcastle and Sunderland who are working together to identify, evaluate and share knowledge about student integration activities which positively affect student retention.

From particular institutional concerns regarding non-completion, each partner identified student groups to test the following hypothesis:

‘Does a student’s sense of integration support their retention?’

Hull is working with part-time and mature groups, Newcastle with engineering students and Sunderland with local students.

A key output of 2008/09 was the successful completion of a collaborative survey with year 1 students. This gave baseline data to explore further through longitudinal research, and will be repeated in 2010. Although some differences exist depending on the respondent’s institution, early findings suggest that the academic experience may be more important to students than the social experience, with implications for transition and freshers activities.

This workshop will highlight our key findings as at February 2010, with reference to institutional audits and shared knowledge of good practices. Activities will encourage participants to review existing institutional practices which support student integration, towards discussion of the implications of our findings on practice elsewhere.

Option Three- Peer Mentoring Special Interest Group

Peer Mentoring: Training and Supporting Peer Support Programmes to Promote Student Transition & Success.

Pathways to Success Research: Jane Andrews, Robin Clark & Baljit Gill Aston University. Margrit Lundestad, Oslo.

Presenters: Jane Andrews and Margrit Ludestad

The value of Peer Mentoring and Peer Tutoring as pedagogical tools within a Higher Education a is reflected in the literature (Hartman, 1990 Woodd, 1997). However, few studies have focused on the distinctive contribution made by Peer Mentoring in respect of promoting transition and retention for first year students. Indeed, there is little empirical evidence regarding the degree to which Peer Mentoring Programmes contribute to overall student success in the first year of undergraduate level studies and in doing so promote retention. By focusing on the pedagogical and social value of student peer mentoring from the perspectives of both student mentee and mentor, this workshop will critically consider issues of practice and policy in promoting student success through peer mentoring.

Building upon emergent research findings of a large international study, and bringing together the experiences of colleagues from 8 institutions, this Special Interest Group discussion will highlight a collaborative approach to researching issues around training and supporting student mentors and mentees. It will bring together best practice from each of the institutions in an open discussion to critically consider how mentoring may be utilised to promote a smooth student transition and retention, and in doing so ultimately enhance student success.

Option Four- Workshop

The HERE Project: Learning from Student Doubters & Successful Programmes

Ed Foster and Sarah Lawther, Nottingham Trent University; Becka Currant and Ruth Lefever, University of Bradford

The HERE Project is one of the seven research projects funded as part of the 'What Works?' series (2008-2011). It has focussed on two areas associated with student retention:

Why do many more students have doubts about being on the right course than actually withdraw, and what can we learn from those who doubt but remain?

Why do some programmes have a better rate of retention than their peers?

This session will concentrate on key lessons from the findings so far.

In spring 2009, students at the partner institutions were surveyed. Doubters viewed the experience more negatively than non-doubters and had greater concerns about being able to cope. In November 2009, doubters were subsequently found to be four times more likely to withdraw than their non-doubting colleagues. Crucially, the reasons doubters cited for having doubts were different to those that had subsequently helped them remain at university. These findings have been developed into a review tool being used with programme teams to better understand what impact actions at programme level can make on student retention.

Participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their own practice in light of the research findings and engage in debate about the key themes.

Option Five- Papers: Academic Integration

Evidence based practice: supporting student transition using a blended learning approach.

Sarah Grain and Anna Holloway, Newman University College Birmingham

Presenter: Sarah Grain

Underpinned by research reviewed in Gorard et al (2006) and student feedback collected from Newman University College, HEADstart is an innovative 14 day, blended learning course taking place prior to Fresher's Week, for a cohort of non-traditional learners. Crabtree et al (2007) notes the review identified a range of issues regarding student retention and success including '...the importance of social and academic integration, the mismatch between student expectations and experiences [and] lack of appropriate academic study skills'. Intended to assist students in their academic and social integration, HEADstart is delivered online via the Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle) and on campus through study skills workshops.

Salmons' (2002) five stage framework was considered when designing the online elements, alongside recommendations from projects such as 'Flying Start' at the University of Central Lancaster (Cook, 2009; Abramson et al, undated), and in consultation with the 'Student Transition and Retention (STAR) Guidelines' (Cook et al, 2005).

This presentation aims to engage the audience through demonstrating how research evidence can inform design and implementation of activities promoting student integration and retention. It

will discuss early indications from research of student perceptions of the benefits of participation in such an intervention.

Two-Point Feedback System: Improving Student Experience in 'Real Time'

Rikke Duus and Amanda Relph, University of Hertfordshire

Presenter: Rikke Duus

Improving the student experience is high on many HEIs' agendas, driven by demands from The Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Quality Assurance Agency. As such, HEIs are realising that as service providers students are at the core of most decisions made in order to improve the service experience. Keyth (1998), Rowley (2003) and Ramsden et al. (1995 in Jackson, 2006) suggest that market research amongst the students should be done with the aim of changing teaching and assessment processes to deliver better quality.

The two-point feedback system (TFS) assesses the student experience twice during a semester, allowing for actionable recommendations to be implemented in 'real time' whilst students are still undertaking the specific module. The aims of the TFS are to understand student dissatisfaction at a deeper level in order to proactively deal with these issues, which may otherwise lead to student drop-outs and a poor learning experience.

The development of the TFS is supported by empirical research undertaken at undergraduate level at a Business School in United Kingdom.

Session Two- Papers and Workshops

Option One- Papers: Promotional Learning Communities

Supporting undergraduate academic and social integration in Higher Education: developing a pedagogic learning community.

Lorraine Weaver and Ian Scott, University of Worcester

The widening participation agenda has led to an increase in students accessing higher education and institutional practices which encourage students to be independent learners from the outset. Modular degree programmes may contribute to the social and academic isolation (Malcolm, 2000). Malcolm suggests that strategies such as online lecture notes and resources may exacerbate students' feelings of isolation because they reduce opportunities for human interaction. Tinto's model of student retention (1975) recognises that successful integration into the social and academic life at university is vital in keeping students engaged with academic study. Thomas (2002) supports this emphasising that successful integration relies on social interaction and the development of meaningful relationships. Thomas goes further than Tinto offering 5 spheres of integration namely: academic, social, economic, support and democratic. It appears that successful undergraduate integration is accomplished through the establishment of meaningful 'connections' with other human beings, resources and knowledge. Fowler and Zimitat, (2008) introduced the concept of 'common time' to support Australian undergraduates and employed activities which focused on improving opportunities: for students to work together on subject content, gain informal feedback on learning and to meet department academic and support staff on an individual basis.

What works? Building Relationships in Learning Communities

Susan Robbins, Oxford Brookes University

Students entering higher education are moving from their known comfort zone into new unknown situations. Unless they successfully make the transition from their former environment and settle and feel part of their new environment, they are unlikely to attain their full academic potential. Before arriving at university students would have had various networks of relationships that supported them: family, friends, colleagues, schools, social groups. Now at university they need to build fresh supportive networks through making contacts with fellow students and with staff. As established members of the university community we can put in place opportunities for students to make the links and develop the relationships that will underpin and support them in their studies.

This paper will introduce a number of initiatives that are being used to encourage the establishment of learning communities within an academic School. They include experiential learning during induction of foundation students, Peer Assisted Learning with second year students, and our Personal and Academic Support System (PASS) of pro-active personal tutoring and support for first year students. We have evidence that the introduction of these initiatives has improved student success rates over the last five years.

Option Two- Papers: Differential Achievement

Journeys to Success: an enquiry into those factors which contribute to the successful attainment of Black and minority ethnic students in four discipline areas at Roehampton University

Jo Peat and Julie Hall, Roehampton University

This paper forms part of a national project exploring attainment for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students across the UK. BME students constitute almost 40% of Roehampton University's undergraduate population. Data indicate that in 2007 -2008 they were less likely to gain a 1st or 2:1 than their white counterparts and less satisfied with their experience. Through appreciative inquiry (AI), we have identified factors which have contributed to improving the attainment of students across 4 discipline areas. This has led to a series of recommendations to policy groups across the university, suggesting ways of enhancing the student experience.

One aspect of our project involved asking groups of BME students to visually represent their ideal university. This could be done purely pictorially, via a visual, annotated map of their learning journey or a mind map. These pictures have provided rich data for analysis, as the students depicted aspects that had not arisen in interviews and questionnaires. We will explore these with participants, asking them to contribute their analysis of the pictures to the debate.

Using Institutional Information to Understand Student Retention and Support Enhancement

Alison Ashby, Naomi Jeffery and Anne Slee, Open University

Presenter: Alison Ashby

A straight forward comparison of pass rates between Open University courses would not take account of the diversity of OU students and the different courses they study. To help us understand more about the factors that impact on course pass rates we have developed a statistical model which considers student and course details. The results of this model enable us to provide a more robust analysis of course pass rates and a fairer method of comparison between courses. The aim is to support colleagues in understanding more about their courses and the factors that contribute to success, to identify actions that may enhance the student

experience and to share good practice. This presentation will consider the benefits and the limitations of this approach and how we use the results along with other key performance indicators / information sources.

Option Three- Papers: Identifying “At Risk” Students

Identifying students ‘at risk’ of early withdrawal: issues and dilemmas

Elena Bedisti, Kirsten Hall, Sue Robbins, University of Reading

Presenter: Elena Bedisti

To increase student success, many HE institutions use HEFCE criteria to ascertain which students are ‘at risk’ of early withdrawal with a view to taking preventative action. This paper discusses the usefulness of this and other possible ways of identifying ‘at risk’ students. These are early findings from a major project which is exploring the issue of retention at two UK universities with very different undergraduate demographics.

Three methods of identifying ‘at risk’ students will be explored, these are: the HEFCE criteria (based on a complex weighting of a variety of factors), Robbins criteria for science subjects (based on entry qualifications in science) and students’ self reported academic competence. The usefulness of the methods will be compared using data on withdrawals from both institutions and additional insights from focus groups and interviews with students.

We will discuss the potential application of our findings by institutions and their impact on individual students. In doing so, we hope to open a debate on the usefulness of these and other ways of determining who is ‘at risk’.

Investigating and developing a measure of students at risk of discontinuing first-year studies prematurely

Alexandra Dobson, Newport Business School and Ron Fisher, Griffith University

Presenter: Alexandra Dobson

The authors report a cross-institutional study to develop a measure, based on Biodata and Situational Judgement Indices (SJI), to assist educators in identifying students at risk of discontinuing university studies early in their academic life. Biodata has been shown in numerous studies (e.g. Owens, 1976; Owens & Schoenfeldt, 1979; Neiner & Owens, 1985; Mumford, Stokes & Owens, 1992) to be a valid and reliable means of predicting future behaviour and performance based on questions about life and work experiences.

The study is a pragmatic approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Creswell, 2000; Easterby-Smith et al 2002) using mixed methods. A qualitative phase collects data from a range of sources (including academic staff and students) to establish a framework for conceptualising what factors lead to students discontinuing university studies prematurely. The second phase of the research develops detailed Biodata and SJI questionnaires using outputs from the qualitative phase. Questions and measurement rubrics will be developed and tested until all themes generated in the qualitative phase have been accounted for. The questionnaire will then be trialled on students enrolled in Griffith and Newport Business Schools.

The main outcome of the project is an assessment tool that will identify students at risk of discontinuing studies prematurely. Identifying students at risk early in their university life will enable a range of interventions to be made to improve retention (e.g. one-on-one advice, mentoring, counselling etc). The power of the research lies in Biodata’s predictive ability to identify students at risk, possibly during their first weeks at university.

The focus of the paper is concerned with both developing the measure and then testing it on a student population to identify students at risk. The actual interventions are beyond the scope of the current study which is aimed at program level with a view to extending it in the future.

Option Four- Workshop

What Makes Students Feel They Belong at University?

Martin Pennington, Craig Bartle and Kine Dorum, Leicester University

The Student Retention and Success Project at Leicester is investigating the importance of 'belonging' and 'intimacy' as factors contributing to its successful record in retaining students through their courses of study. Initial investigation indicates that students value 'feeling a belonging to the institution/department' and the importance of 'the intimacy of the institution and its staff'. The project aims to identify what lies behind these statements, and to explore and evaluate the practices that might foster these responses.

The workshop will be based on current parallel strands of research:

A survey of 1st Year students (total cohort c370 students) within the College of Medicine, Biological Sciences and Psychology to identify influences on the development of 'belonging'
Qualitative data from a student video diary project run by the GENIE CETL

The workshop will consist of:

- Presentation of main research findings
- Structured opportunities for delegates to:
 - Share their perspectives on concepts of belonging
 - Draw on each others' knowledge and experience
 - Consider the implications of the research for institutional practice

Option Five- Synthesis

Student Persistence and Success in United States Higher Education: A Synthesis of the Literature

There is a long tradition of researching student retention and success in the US, and many of the US models have been very influential in the UK. In the US 'persistence' or 'retention' refers to the enrolment patterns of students at specific points within postsecondary institutions. The terms are often used synonymously, although Mortenson (2005) describes the distinction between the two terms as being either a 'student-initiated decision' (persistence), or as a reporting and tracking indicator from the 'institutional perspective' (retention). In this document we outline the theoretical models related to student persistence, institutional retention, and student engagement that have evolved in the US context, and institutional responses to improving student persistence, retention and engagement.

The synthesis has been commissioned by the Higher Education Academy as part of its EvidenceNet resources on equity and widening participation. The synthesis has been prepared by Dr Wendy G. Troxel, Illinois State University. The full synthesis will be available soon on the Higher Education Academy's website.

Charlie Nutt, Executive Director, US National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)

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Session Three- Symposia

Option One- Diversity and Student Success

Who Would Learn in a Place Like This? Tensions, Challenges and Future Directions for Improving Student Retention in the 21st Century

Christine Brougham, Coventry University

Abstract to be confirmed

Retention: A Holistic Approach

Christine Hey and Robin Sedgwick, University of Derby

Presenter: Christine Hey

This paper builds on an investigation undertaken by Hey (2006 unpublished) into the location of a Retention Project within the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies Programme at the University of Derby. Following expansion of the teaching team, re-validation (2007) and the development of new retention tools and strategies, the authors reflect upon the ethos and structures that underpin successful retention rates across all three stages of the Programme. Hey & Sedgwick suggest that the overarching principle for successful retention is the implementation of a Team ethos that is student focussed, open door and recognises individual learning and life journeys. These are underpinned by clear and coherent programme structure, excellent teaching and flexible, focussed, pastoral support. The authors therefore place their strategy within the political and social landscape of retention, recognising the impact of financial audit upon Higher Education policy whilst maintaining that retention is not only a measure of successful Team strategy but of a wider commitment to integrity, excellence in teaching and recognition of individual life journeys.

Learner Development and Student Success

Matthew Daley, Ellen Pope and Anne Wheeler, Aston University

Presenters: Matthew Daley and Ellen Pope

With the widening of access and globalisation of Higher Education, there is a need to maintain and further enhance the learning experience of an increasingly diverse student population. Additionally, employers demand a flexible and adaptable workforce to suit the constantly evolving requirements of the workplace (Kemp and Seagraves, 1995).

One of the most significant challenges facing universities is the development of effective, high quality and equitable approaches to support changing student needs and expectations (Brunken and Delly, 2009). In response, Aston University established a central service called the Learning Development Centre to meet students' learning requirements with a focus on students' success and maximising their potential.

Aston University featured as one of 10 case studies by the National Audit Office as good practice for widening participation and retention. This paper examines the decision in the Learning Development Centre to move to a positive developmental role, focusing on enabling students' success in order to enhance their learning potential and improve retention. The paper will report the findings of a semi-quantitative study undertaken in 2009, and includes academic staff and students' perceptions of the Learning Development Centre.

Option Two- Improving Retention in Health

Improving Student Retention on Nursing Courses at a UK Institution

Elaine Donnelly, Jan Quallington and Alison Cartwright, University of Worcester

Presenter: Jan Quallington

Commissioned by NHS West Midlands

The issue of retaining students on nursing courses is a major issue in the UK and it is estimated that the UK withdrawal rate could be as high as 24.2%. An investigation into student nurse withdrawal was conducted and an induction programme to increase retention and success was implemented.

Methods: A survey of withdrawing students and focus groups with current students, practitioners, practice facilitators, and teaching staff were conducted. This informed the design of a series of 'talking heads' videos from the perspective of current students, a practice induction programme, a database of newly qualified and senior students to provide support and a web discussion area for intercalating students.

The focus groups highlighted issues including the students' perception that no one cares, the overloading of students on practice placements and the desire of the staff to offer more proactive support to students. The success of the cohort will be evaluated as the courses progress.

This project explores the complex issue of student nurse retention and through a new programme, aims to improve student success. It is hoped that by addressing this issue, the immense costs incurred by the DoH, academic institutions, and individuals can be avoided.

Staying the Course: Examining Enablers and Barriers to Student Success within Undergraduate Nursing Programmes

Victoria Boyd and Stephanie McKendry, Glasgow Caledonian University

Presenter: Victoria Boyd

Despite student retention and progression being of core policy and practice interest in the UK HE sector, comparatively little attention has been given to date to the experiences of those students who make the positive choice to stay on a programme of study. Studies of withdrawal identify, for example, personal, financial and academic reasons for non-progression (Tinto, 1983) and often represent the student experience in retrospect after withdrawal (Yorke, 1999). Examining the experiences of students who choose to continue their studies can provide an opportunity to consider the positive and enabling aspects of degree study. These include the consideration of practical student support, such as funding, as well as the pivotal role that key staff play in providing information, advice and guidance (Bouden, 2008; RCN, 2008). Additionally, patterns of student engagement and aspiration can be noted.

This session will focus on a small research project being undertaken in the School of Health at Glasgow Caledonian University. The research uses a variety of mixed method data collection techniques to gain the students' perspective of key enablers which make progression and completion possible. This paper will outline some of the emerging themes in order to promote discussion amongst policy makers and practitioners.

An Exploratory Study of Student Nurse Persistence

Mark Avis, Marion Leducq and Maggie Mallik, University of Nottingham

Presenter: Marion Leducq

The NAO (2007), the DH (2006) and more recently, Prymachuk et al (2009) state that much can be done to improve retention through targeted student support and curriculum innovation. One approach to understanding how the institution could respond to the needs of its students is to identify and examine the reasons they stay, despite seriously considering leaving (Bowden, 2008).

This presentation describes a study that sought students' views on factors that influenced their own decisions to persist with their undergraduate nursing courses. Objectives were to estimate the percentage of students who seriously consider leaving; to identify vulnerable time periods, factors that precipitate thoughts of leaving and support systems that students consider important in facilitating course commitment and subsequent retention. Data collection was conducted in two stages: an on-line questionnaire to all undergraduate nursing students (391 responded), followed by focus group interviews with a self-selected sample (n=35) recruited from the survey.

The presentation will discuss how we are acting on the recommendations that emerged from the study findings, and share examples of current projects and initiatives that we are taking forward as part of our strategic approach to improve student retention and success.

Option Three- Student Expectations and Success

Imaging a Future: Possible Selves and Student Success

Jacqueline Stevenson, Sue Clegg, Linzi Anderson and Hilary Sommerlad

Presenter: Jacqueline Stevenson

This paper will present emerging findings from an on-going project for the HEA Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics exploring the connections between 'possible selves', retention, and academic achievement. Possible selves are future representations of the self including those that are desired and those that are not, and play both a cognitive and an affective role in motivation - facilitating a belief that some selves are possible and providing a clear goal to work towards, or avoid. Students with elaborated possible selves are more likely to set academic and career goals and put actions in place to realise these, including remaining within higher education. However, possible selves can only include those selves which are envisaged as achievable. Our research suggests that class, gender and racialised differences are significant in how students view their chances of becoming their desired possible self and so influences their decision to remain within higher education, or not. We conclude by arguing that supporting students to develop more elaborated possible selves will enhance the retention of all students, but that supporting students who enter HE with less access to traditional forms of social capital is especially important.

Student Expectations and Implications for Retention

Deborah LePlay, De Montfort University

Widening access has seen Higher Education in England move from being an 'elite' to a mass system. The advent of student fees has also seen the quality of HE provision, its support networks and the learning environment in the spotlight. Retention 'speak' (transition to HE, student experience, student support) is said to describe a collective experience, and by problematizing student experience in this way, governments and institutions appear to be responding effectively to student expectations. But what and whose expectations are they

responding to? And to what extent do student expectations, and the degree to which students perceive that they are being met, determine student retention and ultimate success? What expectations do students have, for instance, of their encounter with the institution and academic staff, and of the extra curricular activities and 'events' which can impact so heavily on a student's ability to complete? This paper will report on work in progress in the context of research being undertaken to investigate first year HE student expectations in a post-92 institution in the Midlands. Data from interviews with first year students and with academic staff will be examined, and implications for retention will be explored.

A Spoonful of Sugar: the Successes and Challenges of Embedding Academic Skills and Support in Traditionally Non-Academic Professional Programmes

Stephanie Mckendry, Victoria Boyd and Gayle McKay, Glasgow Caledonian University
Presenters: Stephanie Mckendry and Victoria Boyd

Both nursing and construction-skills training has evolved within the last generation from primarily work-based, college-sector programmes to professionalised degrees taught within the higher education establishment. Students who may have no desire to learn in such a formal setting are now expected to adjust to the conventions of the academy.

This paper will report on the activities of Academic Development Tutors in the Schools of Health and the Built and Natural Environment within Glasgow Caledonian University as they support students in their transition to university. With two very different cohorts, the ADTs have developed varying academic skills support initiatives to enhance student success and improve retention. From pre-entry work to academic development embedded within curriculum design, emphasis has been placed on clarifying expectations and the importance of academic skills to professional practice.

The roles have been in place for over 18 months and thus a strong evidence base of qualitative data and some statistical analysis has been generated to inform future activities. However, the limitations of quantitative measurements and the difficulties of evaluating the impact of the roles will also be examined.

Option Four- Managing Withdrawal

A Strategic Decision to Leave?

Karen Williamson and Jamie Harding, Northumbria University

A survey of Social Science students at one university showed that a significant minority had considered leaving their programme during the first year, for a wide variety of reasons. One reason that several gave for staying was that they refused to 'give up'. Qualitative interviews with students who had left an academic programme showed that fear of being considered a failure was a major difficulty they had faced when reaching the decision to leave. Such negative feelings have echoes in government policy, where retention rates are a performance indicator for universities.

However, the qualitative interviews also indicated that, for many students, leaving an academic programme was a carefully thought out and strategic decision. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that students who leave programmes are often more powerful and strategic learners than many of their contemporaries. Interviewees demonstrated a strong grasp of what they wanted from their course and what was expected of them in higher education. One effect of encouraging students to reflect on their own approach to learning may be to lead more to realise that the programme on which they are studying is not the most appropriate for them and to take the decision to leave

When is a student 'drop-out' a 'drop-out'?

Debbie Loveday, University of Central Lancashire

Traditionally, students who 'drop-out' of academic study may have been considered 'losers,' a drain on resources with no commitment. At the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) a successful initiative, 'Fresh Start' has supported over 1800 students in returning to study with renewed enthusiasm and sharpened focus.

Having withdrawn from academic life students previously felt life options were restricted and hopes of successfully achieving a higher education award had ended. With a holistic approach and ethical stance, students are met on a one-to-one with a Fresh Start Advisor. The safe, supportive and non-judgemental environment facilitates the autonomous exploration of students' individual needs.

With evidence based practice prides itself on a sound and robust referral process, including Disability Advice, finance and careers input.

The McGuire Report (DFES, 2005) recommended, 'The role of the Careers Service within [universities] could be extended by advocating and introducing a scheme such as 'Fresh Start.'

This paper will discuss how the initiative successfully embedded into UCLan culture (triumphs and challenges) and issues influencing students in their decision to both withdraw from studies and re-engage. The paper will also discuss the exploration which takes place between student and Advisor, ultimately facilitating a 'drop-out' into a successful graduate.

Thinking about leaving? Targeted support for students

Hazel Christie and Katrina Castle, Edinburgh Napier University

Presenter: Hazel Christie

This evidenced-based paper shares good practice from a retention initiative undertaken at Edinburgh Napier University. Established in 2005, and based in Wider Access and Retention Services, the service offers students who are thinking about leaving the opportunity to meet with a Student Adviser on a one-to-one basis. The Adviser offers impartial and confidential advice to students.

(https://studentportal.napier.ac.uk/studentaffairs/skillslearnerdevelopment/thinking_of_leaving/Pages/default.aspx). The remit is also strategic and includes gathering information about why students leave and contributing to the policy process at institutional level. In the paper we consider the following issues: what the Adviser offers; who uses the service and why; how effective the service is with respect to the retention and progression outcomes of the students; and the strengths and weaknesses of this model of support (Edinburgh Napier University SRSG 2009).

Thinking about Leaving offers a framework that has relevance to other institutions. We will seek input from participants about the relative merits of this approach to retention. We would welcome thoughts on how to use a service of this kind to empower students to make good decisions that work for them, and how best to tailor the service to support students with very diverse needs (see also Thomas 2002; Yorke and Thomas 2003).

Option Five- Institutional Retention Strategies

Enhancing Student Success for All

Amanda Ingleby and Alison Halstead, Aston University

Presenter: Amanda Ingleby

The embedding of widening participation (WP) is influenced by how it is both structured and managed (Shaw et al, 2007) and at Aston University this has been achieved through integration within new institutional strategies for learning and teaching, and employability.

Founded upon an evidence-based and full student life-cycle approach, WP and success for all is implemented and evaluated through three key university groups which focus upon outreach, learning and employability. These groups now have a broader remit for student diversity extending beyond students from under-represented groups.

Whilst in the sector there is still a predominant focus upon early stages of the student life-cycle (Storan, 2009) Aston has deployed a full student life-cycle approach for more than five years. Student success is defined by progression, achievement, and employment outcomes.

This model has synergy with a recently proposed framework for improving institutional student retention (Thomas and May, 2009). The paper will outline some of Aston's practices to enhance student success deploying the four key strands of this framework.

Monitoring of institutional access and retention data is key to identifying and being responsive to any performance issues. Recent analyses will be shared including a reflection of future priorities.

From Application to Graduation: A Cross Institutional Approach to Student Retention and Success

Elizabeth Caldwell and Nicholas Gregson, University of Central Lancashire

Presenter: Nicolas Gregson

The University of Central Lancashire has a diverse student body and has been at the forefront of widening participation, recruiting a high percentage of non-traditional students. The university has developed a strategy for retention and student support which has seen an improvement in continuation rates from 83.3% in 2002-3 to 85.1% in 2007-8. The strategy has involved adopting a cross institutional approach to retention from preregistration to graduation, incorporating the provision of accessible management information and specialist support. In particular, four central initiatives have provided a holistic and integrated approach to student transitions: Flying Start eases the transition to university life, WISER supports academic development, M&M provides a peer mentoring service and Fresh Start engages and supports students returning to study. The individual projects are regularly evaluated through interviews and surveys of staff and students and an interesting trend has emerged where students are engaging in multiple initiatives. These students have become a key resource providing enthusiastic role models across the university and are part of the success of the integrated approach. At various stages of the presentation, the audience will be invited to discuss equivalent services in their own institutions and how these work in partnership with one another.

Developing a Holistic Institutional Policy for Student Transition

Clare Carter, University of Ulster

The University of Ulster wanted to ensure that its widening access strategy was consolidated by the success of students once studying at the University. It therefore initiated a project to look at the expectations and experiences of first year students. One outcome from this research was the drafting of a Transition Policy. This has a number of aims: primarily it is a framework to ensure that every student has relevant support to make a successful series of transitions into and through higher education. It also serves as a focus for discussion of retention efforts in the University and, by identifying stages in transition, helps course teams to concentrate interventions where institutional data indicates it is appropriate.

The success of the policy is dependent on its implementation at levels from the institutional to the module, and it is deliberately non-specific as to the mode of delivery, allowing courses to tailor actions to their ethos and needs. The requirements of the policy are considered when courses are validated, and Faculties report annually on their implementation of the policy, and any good practice identified. There remains the challenge however of getting buy-in to ensure enhancement of the student experience for all students.

DAY TWO

Session Four- Papers and Workshops

Option One- Papers: Retaining Specific Student Groups

Supporting Taught Postgraduates: Creating a Shared Understanding

Ela Beaumont, University of Salford

The focus of this paper is the taught postgraduate experience, from both the student and tutor and perspective. Masters programmes have proliferated in recent years, and in the past decade, the number of masters students in UK universities has risen from 50,000 in the mid 1990's to over quarter of a million now (McCormack 2008). This includes a rise in overseas students, who now comprise 23% of the total. Currently there are around 3000 full and part time taught postgraduates at the University of Salford, including a variety of home and premium fee-paying international students, early and mid career professionals, later career professionals and career changers.

So, evidence suggests that Salford can be compared to other UK universities, in that taught postgraduates comprise a substantial and increasing group in higher education, due in part to a strong focus on Continuing Professional Development by professional bodies (Chivers 2007). This current 'small world experiment' (Marcus 1998) will shed light on the experience of a group of mid-career professionals on taught masters courses at Salford. Through interviews and field study, this work employs an anthropological gaze in an attempt to understand the internal logic of the teaching of professional taught post graduates, from their point of view; in order to 'make the strange familiar and the familiar strange' (Ginzburg 2002). It also considers the view from the postgraduate tutor perspective, since there is a complex set of relationships between students, who have personal and professional interests and ambitions, and staff, who have a commitment to academic standards in their role as gatekeeper (Anderson 2006).

The study relates to courses that, in general terms, applicants expect to be vocational, in other words, courses that students perceive will enhance their employment opportunities and make a contribution to their tangible, practical skills (Kumar and Usunier 2001, Ottewill and MacFarlane 2003). Evidence suggests that, from the student perspective, such courses will enhance employability prospects, whilst marketing encourages the perception that such programmes will bring practical skills-based advantages to students (Humfrey 1999, De Vita and Case 2003). From the tutor perspective, teaching these courses can be very challenging (Turner 2006), bringing together as they do, a diverse student cohort with different learning and work experiences

Retention of Vocational and Work-Based Learners

Amelia Rout, David Round and Chris Brownless (consultant), Staffordshire University
Presenter: Amelia Rout

Recent research (eg Baliey & Bekhradnia, 2008) suggests that vocational learners in higher education may be more likely to withdraw from their course. This study explores the retention of vocational entrants to HE.

HESA data were interrogated to explore differences between traditional and vocational entrants. Questionnaires, interviews and focus groups took place with a variety of groups to further explore the any differences. The qualitative data were explored using thematic analysis.

The overall recommendations from the research are that the Lifelong Learning Network:

Raise awareness amongst admissions tutors, admissions teams and admissions policy makers of the successful performance of vocational entrants.

Links with existing student support networks and offers funding to improve the visibility of sources of information, advice and guidance, so that vocational learners who may need additional support are better able to access this support.

Invests in staff development to respond to manage learner expectations and the cultural change from FE to HE for example reciprocal placements for teachers in FE and HE to improve the link between the two environments, or joint staff development sessions.

The LLN are developing a programme of practical measures that build on the findings of this research.

Option Two- Papers: Curriculum Design and Organisation

Dumping the Lecture: the Impact of Small Group Seminars on Student Performance and Retention.

Dennis Duty, University of Huddersfield

Cutting edge research is beginning to focus on the link between what happens in the classroom and the learning and retention of students. Furthermore, widening participation means that Universities are increasing their proportions of 'non-traditional' students, many of whom have particular learning styles and are perceived to be lacking traditional academic skills. When exposed to the university culture these students experience problems, particularly with lectures, and whilst pedagogical theory suggests that small groups enhance student performance and development, universities often cling to existing culture and structure. This case study describes how in response to poor retention on a business course a 'new' university changed their teaching from lectures to seminars. This change took place in 2004 and the case highlights the organisational and operational aspects of the changes such as timetabling and resources. Data are used pre and post the changes, 2002 to 2008 (753 Students), to examine attendance and performance during this time. Results indicate significant improvements in attendance, performance and retention for seminars. Further questioning, revealed students had an overwhelming preference for seminars due to higher engagement and tutor interaction. Implications for culture and structure and pedagogy are also presented as a background framework.

Thinking Inside the Box – Maximising Student Success Within a Repositioned Modular Curriculum Structure

Monica Mason and Clare Milsom, Liverpool John Moores University

Examination of institutional data at Liverpool John Moores University has revealed that the students score better on semester 1 modules than semester two or year-long modules, most markedly at level 1. The reasons for this disparity have been investigated through qualitative research into the curricular structure and delivery of programmes that are particularly effective in promoting student success.

In order to promote programme cohesion and extend the modular study period the University has decided to re-couple the teaching semesters. The enhanced standard model for modules will be 24 credits delivered within an academic year. This change represents an unrivalled opportunity for programme renewal. How can an institution use conflicting information to identify and make best use of effective practice to maximise the performance of all students? Within a year-long modular framework what strategies are available to ensure that curriculum design facilitates

student success? Critical questions will be raised in the presentation for participants to reflect on in the context of their own institutions.

Outcomes of curriculum analysis will be presented and we will propose strategic models for programme design that are cost effective and maximise student success.

Option Three- Workshop

Where Do You Go For Help?

Jacqui McCary and Sheila Pankhurst, Anglia Ruskin University

Presenter: Jacqui McCary

All HEIs provide numerous sources of support and advice to students, but how often do we ask our students to tell us where they would wish to go to seek different types of advice?

Undergraduate students at Anglia Ruskin University and its joint venture partners were asked, in relation to various aspects of their life at university, 'Where would you like to go for help and guidance?' More than 700 first and second year students responded to this question, as part of a larger online survey, conducted in April and May 2009.

This workshop will allow participants to explore any preconceptions they may have about where students want to be able to go to get advice when things go wrong. We will be using interactive response units ('crickets') to facilitate quick analysis of participants' views and to encourage discussion. As part of this workshop, we will also present data showing what the students themselves had to say.

Option Four- Workshop

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS): Who Benefits and How?

Marcia Ody, University of Manchester

The University of Manchester has a well established and internationally recognised PASS programme and hosts the UK National Centre for Supplemental Instruction (SI)/PASS.

Based on the SI model, PASS is a peer-supported, co curricular voluntary programme; trained higher year students facilitate regularly scheduled group study sessions to supplement the core curriculum. PASS Leaders encourage active learning in an informal, friendly and fun environment that does not seek to replace any form of interaction between staff and students but to provide another opportunity for students to enter into institutional discourse with their peers. As part of an integrated approach to personalising the student experience, PASS is embedded within the University of Manchester's strategic goals.

Drawing from the presenters' experience of PASS and widespread research this workshop will facilitate discussion to explore:

- Why do we implement peer support?
- Who are the stakeholders of peer support programmes?
- Who benefits from peer support and how?
- What evidence of benefits do we have?

This interactive session will encourage participants to share practice and to identify different methodologies for evidencing benefits at various levels within an institution. We will explore how

such evidence can be utilised effectively and strategically in gaining value and support for initiatives.

Option Five- Workshop

Enhancing student integration and success through a holistic engagement approach

Colin Bryson and Hannah Lyons, Newcastle University

Fostering student engagement enables students to integrate into university (Tinto, 1992) and enhances learning and achievement (Bryson and Hand 2007). The current project adopts a multi-stranded approach to engaging students undertaking Combined Honours degrees. Students taking such flexible degrees face greater alienating forces (Mann, 2001) on transition into university and in forging a coherent student identity. To address this at Newcastle we have introduced a set of interlinking interventions – which are extracurricular because students take unique module combinations. We began by reinvigorating the student participation system, to develop mechanisms so that the students could co-own the issues and develop the solutions. This led to the development of an enhanced induction process, including pre-induction process, and creating a programme linked social agenda – which was driven in main part by a new student mentoring scheme. This has been fairly successful but there appears to be considerable variation in student engagement with these activities. We are gathering considerable evaluation evidence gathered through focus groups, interviews and surveys. We will present our preliminary analysis, focussing particularly on the variation in participation in these enhancement activities and the extent to which this may matter, as a basis of discussion with delegates.

Session Five- Papers and Workshops

Option One- Papers

The Devil is in the Detail: Student Narratives of their Transition to Higher Education

Claire Hamshire, Manchester Metropolitan University

This paper reports on a study employing narrative inquiry with the first year undergraduate Physiotherapy students at Manchester Metropolitan University. The purpose of the study was to explore the 'wholeness' of the students' transitions into higher education; where the focus was on exploring lived experience; to encourage the students to relate their personal stories. This study builds on previous research that has demonstrated that the implications on the individual of the transition to higher education can be wide-ranging in terms of emotional and practical issues (Hamshire and Cullen 2007).

10% of the 2009 cohort were selected randomly and invited to attend 1:1 interviews (n=8). These interviews were designed to enable the students to tell their own stories, in their own words without the interruption of pre-set questions that could have curtailed their accounts. Thus this data was collected in narrative form; were transcribed verbatim and narrative fragments were collated under broad terms

This session will present a summary of the findings to date on student transition and make recommendations for curriculum design and delivery to meet student needs during pre-entry, induction and the first year.

Feeling like a Trespasser: Student Reflections Upon Early Days in Higher Education

Julie Wintrup and Liz James, Southampton Solent University

Early findings from the first year of a longitudinal study of a cohort of health and care students will be presented and discussed. Most participants work full time and study alongside, many being seconded by employers. Their reflections upon early experiences at a leading university suggest a good deal of anxiety and for some, a sense of being trespassers in a place to which they do not belong. Relationships with each other and with staff can ameliorate this over time but participants report that increases in confidence remain fragile. Thoughts of not continuing with their education are often present and the choice of leaving remains an important one for some, providing reassurance for those who do not feel compelled to stay. For others, employer support provides both an incentive and a pressure to continue. Trends indicate that seconded students generally complete their education in greater numbers than self-funding students.

Theoretical insights will be brought to bear on students' narrative accounts, in particular, their self-descriptions as practical learners. Drawing upon the concepts of tacit knowledge and practical learning (Sternberg et al, 2000), participants will be invited to explore the analogy of a 'greenhouse', understanding the first-year curriculum as an opportunity gradually to develop a sense of robustness in this often vocationally-trained group of HE learners.

Option Two- Papers: Retaining Mature Students

A Balancing Act? Development and Application of a New Model for Retention of Part Time Distance Learning Students

Susan Edwards, University of Derby

This paper proposes a new theoretical model to demonstrate the uniqueness of the part-time distance learner's position when engaged in Higher Education. It takes account of the evidence that part-time distance learners have needs and face challenges that are different to full-time learners and campus based learners. It acknowledges that selecting approaches to increase the retention of students needs to be underpinned by an understanding of the reasons behind withdrawal. It also encourages the practitioner to acknowledge the differences between students and the way in which their external influences combine to create barriers to retention.

Edwards Model recognises the importance of understanding the student journey for part time distance learners and allows for the individual nature of students' circumstance reflecting the complex interactions and relationships that occur within a learner's experience. It allows different weights to be placed upon the retention scales dependant upon the impact or weight that that circumstance has for that particular student.

It is Nice to Know That We Might Be Doing Something Right. Research Findings from a Case Study of Access Learners on a UK Diploma in Nursing Programme.

Katherine Hinsliff-Smith, University of Nottingham

In the UK, levels of attrition from pre-registration programmes are causing a concern for nurse educators, funders and the Government. In 2006, The Department of Health produced guidelines, requiring institutions to address the continual attrition and withdrawals from these programmes.

This case study, using focus group interviews, involved participants who were Access learners and who successfully progressed to a 3-year full time Diploma in Nursing at one pre- 1992 university, an area for which limited studies exist on Access entrants.

The study findings indicated that Access learners are able to develop a range of coping strategies in relation to academic demands and caring responsibilities, which are transferred to their Diploma course. Of note, participants highlighted that pre-course advice and guidance relating to their HE destination was of paramount importance as were the positive links developed between FE and HE institutions.

While this study should be of interest to the 52 institutions offering pre-registration nurse training, the findings have resonance for all discipline areas that encourage Access entrants.

Option Three- Papers: Early Interventions for Success

A study of Influences on the Wellbeing of First Year Students in Three Universities in Kent

Moira Mitchell, Canterbury Christ Church University and Felicity Dunworth, Aims Higher Kent and Medway

Presenter: Moira Mitchell

This paper presents an investigation into the wellbeing and help seeking behaviours of new students in their first and second terms in three universities. It contends that retention is linked to certain aspects of student background and experience, prior to and at university.

The study measured psychological wellbeing using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ). Findings were similar across institutions: most students recorded high levels of disturbance on entering university (6 or above), but this tended to improve across terms. However, students with no family history of Higher Education recorded significantly higher levels of psychological disturbance in both terms. Anxiety about subject choice and academic performance had a detrimental impact on student wellbeing in both the first and second terms.

The audience will be invited to discuss interventions or service developments that could be implemented to address the key problems identified by the research. Examples from institutions that participated in the research will then be presented for consideration. These include a review of the pastoral role of academic staff and how they are supported, an initiative to improve student subject choice and a review of academic feedback arrangements.

First Fail Forward

Andrea Lee and Simon Smith, University of Central Lancashire

Presenter: Andrea Lee

The paper covers an ongoing exploratory research project on student retention in Lancashire Business School, University of Central Lancashire. This micro-level project identifies what approaches are successful in assisting student retention. The data collection focuses on a key element in student retention – the failure of the first assignment, followed by the use of academic coaching to move students forward and promote success.

Previous studies have noted that the first assessment often forms a catalyst for students leaving programmes (Yorke and Longden, 2004; Scott and Graal, 2006). Indeed, studies in America (e.g. Hanger and Goldenson, 2007) have demonstrated that working with students at this stage can deliver a significant improvement in retention. This research project has concentrated on the Accounting and Finance programmes, which have a significant failure rate. Students who failed the first assignment on the programme were contacted and interviewed to explore the reasons given for, and impact of, initial failure. A sub-sample of these students then engage in academic coaching. The paper explores the findings and presents a student centred view of failure and its impact. In addition, an evaluation of the coaching as an intervention to promote student success and improve retention is presented.

Option Four- Workshop

Understanding the WP Dividend: The Benefits for Higher Education Students of Involvement in Widening Participation Activities

Graeme Atherton and Jim Riches, University of Westminster

Presenter: Jim Riches

This paper will examine the relationship between students' involvement in widening participation to Higher Education related projects, and their engagement in Higher Education. Government investment in widening participation activity in England in the last 10 years has led to increasing numbers of students working with learners at pre Higher Education level. The objective of such work is to benefit the pre Higher Education learners. However, it is possible that the students themselves may be experiencing equal, if not greater, benefits themselves. Focus group sessions have been undertaken with a total of over 100 students from 10 different, contrasting universities in central London who are participating in the 'Aimhigher Associates Project'. These sessions indicate that the students feel they are developing communication, organisational & teamwork skills that are of great benefit to their studies. In particular though, the work is acting to support their whole engagement in the 'experience' of Higher Education. It is making an active contribution to the 'success' of the students in terms of assisting in the academic development. In some individual cases participating in the Aimhigher Associates project had an impact on students views regarding their overall participation in HE, hence a link can be made with issues connected to student retention. The implications of this research are that the potential dividend from Aimhigher & widening participation work is being systematically under-estimated.

Option Five- Workshop

The Financial Impact of Student Non-Retention in Tough Times

Mark Byrne, Southampton Solent University

This workshop will explore and examine the negative monetary impact of student non-retention in the UK university sector. A model will be presented that examines the financial implications of non-retention of students from the first year (Grayson & Grayson, 2003) and beyond. More positively, it will also help to establish the effect an increase in retention rate may have on an institution's revenue by the time retained first-year students eventually graduate (Schuh, 2005). The model will be accessible during the workshop and attendees are encouraged to bring a wifi enabled laptop (with Excel) to the session if possible (however this is not a prerequisite).