Retention: developing and implementing pre-entry, induction and ongoing retention tactics

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Abstract

The Four Counties Group is a collaborative association of the higher education institutions in four of the six counties of the Eastern Region (Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk). Through the HEFCE special widening participation funding programme during 2001-02 the group ran a series of regional workshops on retention, involving key stakeholders from across the education sector looking at pre-entry activity, induction and the post-entry period including advice and guidance.

Building on, and complementing this during 2002, was a piece of desk-based research, culminating in the production of a practitioners' guide to retention. The guide adopts the HEFCE student lifecycle model (pre-entry advice and guidance; admissions and induction; first term/semester; moving through the course and employment) to examine retention, from both an institutional and a student perspective, using text supported by case studies and examples of good practice to examine these issues.

The paper will outline the key points covered by the guide.

Introduction

'Access to higher education is not only a matter of getting in to university; it is a matter of staying in and emerging in good standing'. House of Commons Education and Employment Committee (2001).

Why does retention matter?

Retention is not a new issue. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 1997) identified that, after the expansion of the early 1990's an increasing number of undergraduates were not completing their degrees. This was attributed to three major factors; finance, diversity of the student body, and reduced institutional support.

There are differential rates of retention amongst institutions, subjects and social classes. The retention issue is most marked in institutions that admit the highest degree of non-traditional students. However there is not a direct relationship between retention and social class. Taken together these factors could undermine the success of the Governments' widening participation strategy.

Non - completion is costly to students and institutions. Students often leave in debt, with very little evidence of attainment. They may be 'switched off' to further learning their future educational opportunities limited. This has implications for institutions investing heavily in recruitment and induction

Towards a definition of retention

A measure of retention indicates the proportion of students not successfully transferring from one stage of a course to the next (House of Commons Education and Employment Committee 2001). This definition does not capture the nuances of retention in terms of the diversity; movement across the sectors and life - long learning. Annually through HEFCE provides the 'Performance Indicators' give an individual or institution's measure of access, retention (non-continuation and projected completion rates) and research outputs (HEFCE 2001a).

In trying to define 'retention' there is also a need to make a critical examination of the term and associated concepts. These concepts are often negative for example 'dropping out' and 'failing student'. Some have often made, following much thought, a positive decision at that point in time.

Current Policy
In 1999 the Government announced the target, that by 2010 50% of those between the ages of 18-30 will have experienced higher education. As a result it has become part of the Governments' agenda to bear down on rates of non- completion in higher education (National Audit Office 2001). A letter from Estelle Morris, Education and Skills Secretary to David Young Chairman of HEFCE at the end of 2001, suggested a change in approach was necessary, that doing 'more of the same will neither increase or widen participation' (HEFCE 2001b). The importance of retention is echoed in Government policy documents such as the Green Paper: 14-19 extending opportunities raising standards. The ethos of stakeholders working together to understand and act on retention can be found in current initiatives such as Partnerships for Progression (HEFCE 2001c).

Pre-entry

A proactive institutional approach
Retaining potential students in the education system can only be partly due to the choices made by students to engage in the system. There must be a bi-directional relationship between institution and student.

Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue (2001) provide a model, 'The Pathway to Retention', which can be adopted by institutions to facilitate retention. Features are; a perceived institutional need for retention; retention becoming an institutional priority; having a broad commitment to retention and possessing a formal retention programme. To this could be added the issue of staff development. If students are to be retained and to progress within the educational system, they have to negotiate entry into university. Admissions officers are the 'gatekeepers' to universities. A central place needs to be given to admissions policies, staff development and practices.

For institutional strategies and policies to be effective monitoring must be in place. However, measurement of retention is problematic. As the student body diversifies, students 'learning careers' may be erratic and over a prolonged period of time. The Performance Indicators produced by HEFCE, although benchmarking institutions, when reporting on measures of institutional retention do not take account of the more convoluted learning trajectories. International evidence, from America using 'tagging of students' suggests an alternative methodology though this, however, may generate ethical issues.

Policy documents (see, for example, HEFCE's Partnerships for Progression HEFCE (2001d), which focuses on the relationships between Higher Education Institutions, Colleges and Schools), suggest that there is room for 'joined - up' thinking between partners who share a central mission. Local and regional collaborations and networks can be seen as facilitating student progression across sectors (from school to college and on into higher education).

Pre-entry and aspirational activities
The aim of this activity is to engage with potential students at an early point before entry into higher education to address concerns, issues and work to raise aspirations in order to encourage progression on into higher education. Retention at a pre-entry level is multi-faceted relating to activity, aspiration raising and information provision.

Many universities have a long history of being engaged in Pre-entry and Aspiration related activities as part of the drive to retain students in education. The Draft Report 'Achieving

Student Success' from Action on Access notes that the 'better prepared a student is for the higher education experience the more likely they are to succeed' (Action on Access 2002 p.5).

In a key publication, Woodrow (1998), suggests that no matter what the widening participation outreach activity students are retained. Activities are offered by higher education institutions to students through partnerships. They include; compact arrangements; summer schools; skills development/ course preparation sessions; student mentoring / tutoring; university taster / master classes; parental events; campus familiarisation visits; advice and guidance; access courses; junior universities; prospective clearing information and support.

There has been recognition that widening participation will lead to a greater differentiation of the student body and, with it, a diversifying of associated needs. For example, students from lower socio-economic groups appear to have greater concern over finances, their ability to study at a higher level, access qualifications, application procedures and personal issues. (Connor and Dawson cited in Dodgson and Bolam 2002).

Post-entry
The period of post entry begins with the registration and induction process. Retention however needs to be considered throughout the student experience. The first semester particularly has been identified as a key time in retaining students. Moxley et al (2001) identified post-entry institutional support as matching institutional resources 'to the needs of the students so that they can master the role of the student' (p26). Students need to be aware that those support services exist and how to use them.

Institutional factors
Martinez and Munday (1998) challenge one commonly held assumption, that student retention is largely about institutional infrastructure (facilities and equipment). These findings can be translated across sectors from further into higher education.

For non-traditional groups the admissions and induction process can be particularly confusing. In the past the induction process was a one - off event at the start of the higher education experience often offered as a homogenous experience to all students through, for example 'Freshers Week'. The challenge is, now, following recognition that a 'one size fits all' model is not appropriate, to create new induction programmes.

Induction needs to be seen not in isolation but as part of a 'third seam' of the recruitment and teaching process. Delivery benefits from being centrally driven and co-ordinated; this limits the potential for information overload. The aim of a programme should be to reduce students' level of anxiety and through taking a pro-active approach to 'troubleshoot' problems allowing the student to feel 'at home' in the university environment.

Recognition of the diversity of the student body suggests that the induction programme should respond in an individualised manner to student need. This can however be an ethical issue.

Although there is a perception that university staff are one of the central factors in retention, in the past this aspect of staff development, has been much neglected (Srivasta 2002). There is a case for recognising both the impact and facilitative role played by all levels of staff in the retention of students. Staff impact takes place through both formal and informal mechanisms.

Teaching, learning and assessment systems are crucial to the retention of students. These factors operate on many levels; across the institution; at departmental and subject levels. For non - traditional students the, style of learning and teaching found within a university often varies from what they have previously experienced in school, and this may be extremely challenging. Research has found (Thomas, Yorke and Woodrow unpublished) a mismatch

between the number of students stating they were withdrawing for academic reasons and the actual numbers failing to pass. A number of pro-active supportive structures have been identified in relation to the curriculum and positive retention outcomes. Placing an emphasis on formative rather than summative assessment, timely feedback, transferable awards, recognition of the social aspect of the learning experience, facilitation of flexible learning opportunities and the role of the Personal Tutor (Dodgson and Bolam 2002).

Student centred factors
The aim of taking a 'student centred' approach to retention is to prioritise the needs of the student rather than prioritising the needs of the institution. A number of student based factors can be identified that effect the 'decision' whether or not to continue with a study programme at a particular point in time (Peelo and Wareham 2002).
Supportive practices required by students to continue within their study include: emotional support and sustenance; informational support; instrumental support; material support and identity support (Moxley et.al. 2001, pp. p26-27). Recognition of these factors underpins a successful approach to working with retention.

Students arrive to commence their study programme with expectations about the institution, department/school and course. These expectations may, or may not, be realistic. Students are, however, more committed to institutions that are perceived as helping them meet their study goals.

Timing of entry is a critical factor in retention. Late entrants, students entering through the clearing process, may have special needs relating to institutional / course expectations. Work in the further education sector has found that the later the application, the greater the chance that the student would fail to complete (Martinez and Munday 1998).

It has been shown that finance and the impact of paid work are key issues in influencing non-completion of programme of study (2001). As a result of the changes in funding, students now work on average between 6-36 hours per week depending on prior financial circumstances (Action on Access 2002). Ozga and Sukhnandan cited in Thomas. Yorke and Woodrow (unpublished) found that students from the lowest two socio-economic groups were more likely than those from the top two groups to withdraw due to financial pressures

The academic experience is at the core of the student experience. There are issues of matching the student to a study programme that fulfils both their immediate and long - term needs. Matching ensures students participate in a quality experience that facilitates learning and maximises potential. Students that withdraw are more likely to believe that they have taken the wrong course and be less likely to believe that their course was interesting or to be satisfied with the quality of the teaching.

As students enter higher education by an increasing number of routes and from a greater range of diverse backgrounds certain sections of the student body may not be adequately prepared to study at a university level. Institutions can usefully work alongside students to enhance study and key skills.

Personal circumstances have been identified by most institutions as the major reason (along with academic failure) for students dropping out (National Audit Office 2001). Research in the further education sector suggests that more mature students cite financial issues as a reason for non completion, in addition many mature female students find family responsibilities influence educational decisions (Nora et al cited in Thomas, Yorke and Woodrow unpublished). Younger students cite family circumstances or health/personal problems (Martinez and Munday 1998).

The provision of advice and guidance is one example of student support services. These services need not only to be in place but to be perceived as easily accessible by the student

body. There is an ethical issue raised by targeting support to those most at risk on a general retention level (as stated above) as well as a specific support services level. There is potential to ghettoise and stigmatise those who may most benefit from these services.

There is a need for an academic and social match between student and institution. Efforts to improve or maintain motivation lead to better retention. The first semester is a crucial time for students to start to form an identity and integrate into their chosen institution. This can be facilitated by social networks.

In a constantly changing career market there is a need for students to be aware of and reflect on their career opportunities. Most students appear to use the careers service at some point, but those most in need of the service appear to be least likely to access and use it (mature students, those from lower socio-economic groups). Current students are more likely than those students at the point of 'dropping out' to be positive about the information they receive about progression opportunities.

On choosing to leave
There will be occasions when, despite the existence of policies, practices and structures, students may choose to leave their present programme of study / institution. It is suggested that managing exit is crucial to both the student and the institution.

Peelo and Wareham (2002) identify different types of student response to the decision to leave the institution or programme of study: passive withdrawal; official withdrawal; struggling on; succeeding despite the odds, and the best outcome. The latter is seen as the most desirable response to the decision to withdraw. The student takes a pro-active approach involving consultation at an early point when difficulties commence; a realistic assessment of the situation is made, and action taken. There is value in framing this as a positive decision for 'that' student at 'that' point in time, rather than defining the decision as a 'failure'. This may facilitate a positive mind set towards lifelong learning, enabling the student to 'return' to study at some future point.

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