

Empowering under-represented students to succeed in higher education: initiatives in early engagement at a post-1992 university.

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented number of students from previously under-represented backgrounds entering UK universities. The undergraduate student population in the UK is now more diverse with regard to age, social class and entry qualification than at any time previously. As the student population becomes ever more diverse the levels and types of Social, Academic and Economic Capital (SAEC) which students bring with them to university differ. Many students, particularly from under-represented groups, feel ill prepared for university, and exhibit low self esteem, low aspiration and believe themselves to have fewer academic skills than their contemporaries. As a result many students feel disempowered and alienated from the pedagogical structures and customs of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

This paper seeks to examine the disparities in SAEC between different groups of students and suggests ways of empowering those students who feel disempowered.

Interventions at the University of Central Lancashire have highlighted the importance of early engagements, socialisation and academic preparedness in the retention of non-traditional students. This paper is both practitioner-orientated and research based. It will share how to persuade your research masters to fund early engagement strategies such as summer schools, which are free to potential students. It will also represent the findings of a three-year research project and suggests that such interventions serve to facilitate the empowerment of students through the forging of informal social support networks, institutional orientation and knowledge of academic conventions.

Overall, the paper is designed to stimulate debate on this important aspect, to disseminate recent research findings, and to share best practice.

Introduction

British universities, and post-1992 universities in particular, have been quick to embrace the New Labour government's commitment to a mass higher education system fuelled by the recruitment of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. For some HEIs this embrace was pragmatic since the 67% growth in full-time undergraduates between 1988 and 1994 seemed to have saturated the market in traditional middle class A level students (HEFCE, 2001). For others, however, the government's policy merely reinforced a long-held commitment to widening participation and provided a long awaited financial incentive. Either way, all UK universities have been much slower in accepting the responsibilities which go with recruiting a much more heterogeneous student population. Many traditional universities still regard A Level qualifications as 'the gold standard' and adopt a 'sink or swim' approach to students with alternative qualifications. Even the new universities are only recently acknowledging that the increasingly diverse levels of social, academic and economic capital of new undergraduates are presenting a challenge to the institutional structures and support systems.

For the non-traditional student, the human toll can be heavy: painful transition to HE, feelings of isolation and not belonging, low self esteem, high withdrawal and non completion rates. Clearly, getting different kinds of students is one thing, keeping them is another.

The predicament outlined above has been mirrored within the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). This new university has grown from a total of 4000 students in 1982 to 26,000 students in 2002 and is now the sixth largest university in the UK. Well before new government policy UCLan had been in the vanguard of Widening Participation and has recruited a high percentage of non-traditional students for many years. Widening Participation was underpinned by one of the first CATS curricula in the UK, an array of full-time and part-time access courses and an extensive network of FE partnerships in Lancashire and Cumbria, all of which offer students guaranteed progression to the University (Abramson,1994). Until very recently, however, structural changes to meet the needs of larger and more diverse cohorts had not been addressed and as a consequence declining retention rates became a cause for concern. By 1998-99, for example, the institutional withdrawal/non-completion rate for Year One stood at 26% and for students entering the University with an Advanced GNVQ background the figure increased to 36% (Abramson and Jones, 2001). It was at this point that the issue of retention began to rise rapidly up the institutional agenda.

In the search for solutions to the retention problem attention first focused on the explanatory model provided by Vincent Tinto in which he argues that high levels of retention are linked with high levels of student integration and congruence with the course and with the culture of the institution (Tinto,1975; Tinto,1987; Tinto, 1993). At its heart, his argument views universities as closed societies with their own inimitable rules of conduct. Given this, he implicitly places the student at the heart of the retention problem, since it is the student's responsibility to integrate and not the university's to accommodate the demographic realities of its new consumers. It also became clear that these new consumers did not and could not live in a closed monastic order. For example, whilst many full-time students still opt to study away from home, a growing number opt to reduce costs by remaining at the family home and studying at the local university. Moreover, the new funding regime requires most students to balance academic study with paid employment (Abramson and Jones, 2002).

Whilst we did not challenge the importance and value of on course integration, we soon came to dispute its *centrality* in the retention debate. What did become central were the concepts of pre-course engagement and empowerment, which would in turn *enhance* on course integration. This, in turn led to the development of summer bridging provision (the Flying Start Bridging Project) which was piloted for three years (1999-2001) using Advanced GNVQ students holding conditional or unconditional offers for the following September. These pre-sessional summer schools were deemed so beneficial that in the summer of 2002 they were opened up to all students holding offers and 550 of them accepted a place.

Since 1999 the persistence and performance of all Flying Start students have been, and still are, being tracked through to graduation. What follows is the results of that tracking together with a 'before and after' analysis of the impact on levels of social and academic capital within the 2002 Summer School cohorts. One finding is worthy of comment at this early point. The first Summer School was structured on the visceral assumption that enhancement of social capital would be the key to the enhancement of all other forms of required capital. Our subsequent research has endorsed this assumption. In essence, the opportunity to make good friends and contacts, together with gaining a realistic expectation of university life before the melee of enrolment and induction is the key. Since 1999 this finding has been validated by the conclusions of separate researchers from as far apart as Dundee and Sydney (see for example, Peat, Dalziel and Grant 2000; Allardice and Blicharski, 2000; Thomas, 2002).

The Flying Start Bridging Project

The pilot Project began as a three day Summer School for Advanced GNVQ applicants at which all food, accommodation and social events were provided free of charge by the University.

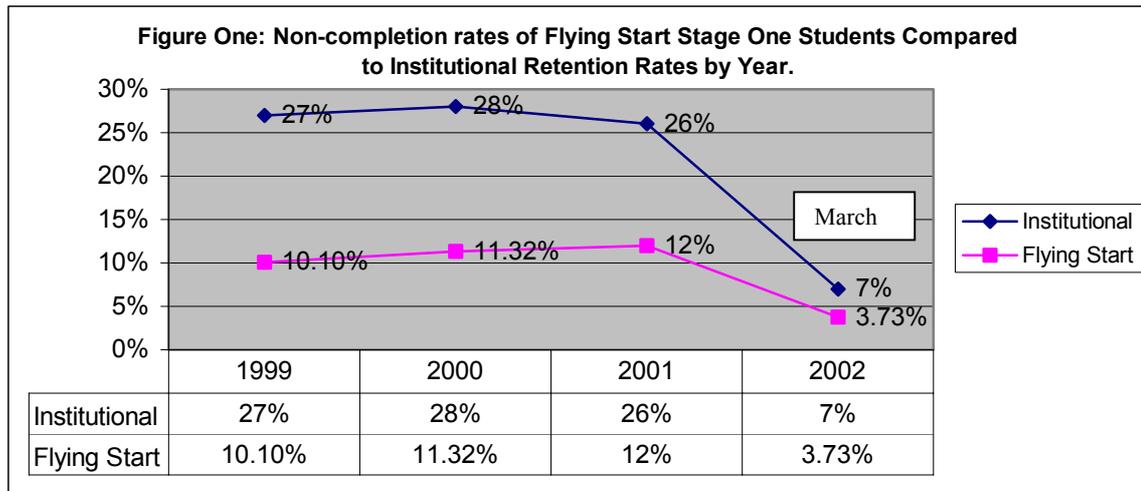
In 1999 the School was a residential three-day event held in early September, which attracted 63 students and focused on fostering higher levels of engagement with UCLan through team building and orientation exercises. The Summer School also included an evening social programme. In 2000, 58 students attended the Summer School, which followed a similar agenda to the first, but with the additional introduction of student mentors who had successfully completed the Summer School in the previous year and had also completed an Effective Learning module in Year One of their degree studies. In 2001 of the 1,434 students invited 120 accepted. Of these, 80 students enrolled at the Summer School which was extended to four days to negate the regional bias that had been evident in earlier years (85% of students attending had been resident in Lancashire). Running in late August the new format introduced students to the key skills of autonomous learning, provided a physical orientation to the campus, and gave key information on how to make the University work for them. The various support agencies, for example, were explained to students together with the differing forms of teaching, learning and assessment. All student exercises were designed to 'break the ice' by being highly interactive in the hope that friends would be made before the main university term began. The material was delivered through a series of lectures, seminars and group activities and the vigorous social programme was maintained. Academic year 2001 also witnessed a second pilot Summer School for Advanced GNVQ students coming to UCLan through Clearing. This School ran in early September and of the 120 students invited 15 accepted, and of these 10 actually enrolled. In academic year 2002-2003 the Project was extended to target all students who had accepted either a conditional or unconditional offer by March 2002. Three Summer Schools and an additional Clearing Summer school were held. A total of 1,504 students were invited and of these 599 students accepted and 550 students attended.

Since Flying Start began in the Summer of 1999 all Summer School students have been tracked and their retention and achievement compared with similar students who did not engage with the Project. This tracking was undertaken to test value for money and to ensure that any new retention strategy at the institutional level could draw on a robust evidence base. Most of the comparative analysis is quantitative. Since 2002, however, a qualitative element has been introduced into the research with the use of student questionnaires and feedback sheets. This element has enabled us to compare personal attributes, levels of pre-course commitment and how the Summer School impacted on attendees. It has also allowed us to explore the causes of concern amongst pre-sessional students and to address these concerns within an evolving Summer School Programme.

Analysis of Findings

A full analysis has been undertaken of the three Advanced GNVQ cohorts (1999-2000, 2000-2001, 2001-2002) and of the 2002 cohort. The aim was to compare retention rates and performance of students who experienced early engagement with those students who did not. Using data available through the University academic administration system it was possible to track those students throughout their University study. Figure One offers a comparison of Flying Start first year withdrawal rates against the institutional average. It is evident that those

students who experienced the early engagement were far less likely to withdraw from study in the first year.



In order to assess the impact of Flying Start on the levels of economic, social and academic capital and to ascertain levels of commitment to the institution of Summer School attendees in 2002 all Flying Start students were requested to complete a questionnaire prior to attendance. This same questionnaire was also completed on the final day of the Summer School. What follows is an analysis of student responses of a sample group of 60 students who attended a Summer School in August 2002.

In August 2002, 123 students attended the Flying Start Summer School, one of four that ran that year. Each student was asked to complete two questionnaires; however, several students failed to complete the post-summer school questionnaire thus reducing the range of usable data. Student responses were then classified by parental occupation using the Standard Occupational Classification 2000 (SOC2000). This reduced the sample of usable data still further as respondents often did not answer questions relating to parental occupation or answered in so vague a manner as to make classification impossible. Therefore, of the 123 students attending the August Summer School only 60 produced usable pre and post comparative data. Students were classified using the parental occupation which related to the highest SOC2000 grouping e.g. where the mother was a medical doctor (2) and the father a paramedic (3) the student would be classified as 2. It was hoped that at least 10 students from each of the nine occupational classifications would form the sample group. However, there were insufficient students from groups 6 and 7 to use and groups 8 and 9 were merged to form one group. The occupational classifications used were as follows:

1. Managers and Senior Officials
2. Professional Occupations
3. Associate Professional and Technical Occupations
4. Administrative and Secretarial Occupations
5. Skilled Trades Occupations
6. Personal Service Occupations
7. Sales and Customer Service Occupations
8. Process, Plant and Machine Operatives

In order to ascertain perceived levels of individual motivation and encouragement from peers and parents students were asked to respond to three statements which were identical on each questionnaire. Questionnaires were scored with 1 = agree, 0 = Not sure and -1 = disagree and then converted to percentage figures. Pre and post Summer School responses remained static with regard to all three statements.

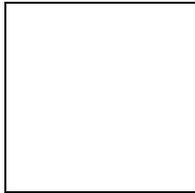


Figure Two illustrates the high levels of individual motivation with regard to university attendance across all occupational groups. This would seem to support the assertion that those students who attend Flying Start are more motivated from the outset (see below). Previous research has indicated that parental support and encouragement is an important contributing factor in student retention issues (Abramson & Jones, 2003) where evidence of parental encouragement is more common in retained students than those that leave early. In all occupational classifications with the exception of group 8&9 parents are perceived by students as being an encouraging factor in the decision to enter Higher Education with 80% or more responding positively to the statement, *'My parents want me to go to university'*. However, of the 8&9 sample only 30% responded positively to this statement.

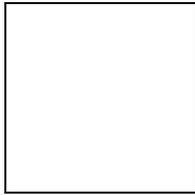
With regard to the encouragement students perceive to have received from schools a clearer picture emerges. Students classified as occupational groups 1, 2 and 3 responded very positively (90% or more) to the statement *'My school has encouraged me to go to university'* whereas students from groups 4 and 8&9 recorded only a 60% positive response and group 5 only 30%. With regard to the Widening Participation strategy of the current government the perception of support received from schools and colleges should be cause for concern, particularly with regard to group 8&9 who have received little encouragement from their parents.

With regard to economic capital it was expected that students from occupational groups 4 to 8&9 would respond more positively to the statement *'I will have problems managing money.'* However, all students identified this as being a major concern both before and after the Summer School. The absence of any discernible patterns in student responses either by parental occupation or pre or post summer school may be linked to the wording of the question and this will be revised in subsequent research The response to the question would seem to be subjective and relative as most people, if asked, have problems managing money regardless of their income base.

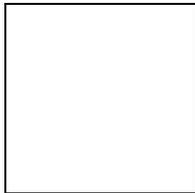
With regard to statements relating to socialisation all pre-Summer School students felt making friends would be problematic with no group responding more than 40% positively to the statement *'I will make friends easily'* and surprisingly occupational group 3 recording an overall negative response of -10%. It would appear that all students regardless of parental occupation feel threatened by the transition to the new social environment of university.

However, when responding to the statement *'I will fit in well with other students'* groups 1,2,3 and 4 responded with 70% or more positive responses, whereas both groups 5 and 8&9 responded with positive responses of only 40%. The lower responses of group 5 and 8&9 may indicate that these students perceive other students as being somehow different from them and

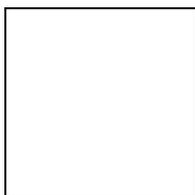
do not feel confident about fitting into this new social environment. Overall social confidence was lowest for group 5 followed by group 8&9.



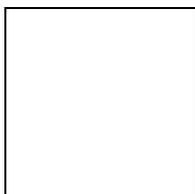
The post Summer School questionnaires (Figure Three B) illustrate all indicators relating to socialisation as being higher for all groups than in the pre Summer School questionnaires (Figure Three A). The largest overall increase in positive responses was in group 8&9 (an overall increase of 40%) and the lowest in group 5 (an overall increase of 13%). The sample groups indicate a trend towards Summer School boosting levels of Social Capital



Students were also asked to respond to statements relating to academic criteria and skills, their confidence relating to passing their first year and their expectations of university. All students seemed to have low confidence levels in time management, essay writing, coping with exams (with the exception of group 3) and managing their work (with the exception of group 1). Overall confidence was lowest for groups 4, 5 and 8&9. However, in response to the statement *'I am confident I will pass my first year'* all groups (with the exception of 1 (60%) and 5 (50%)) responded with 80% or over positive responses. Groups 1 and 5 confidence levels on passing the first year were more closely aligned to academic skills confidence than other groups. Group 8&9 had the largest discrepancy between skills confidence and confidence in passing the first year. No group replied to the statement *'I know what the university expects of me'* with more than a 50% positive response.



Responses to the statements on the post Summer School questionnaires were initially surprising. Student confidence levels across all groups remained under 50% with the exception of group 4 responses to statement relating to exams. The overall level of confidence in academic skills decreased for all groups with the exception of group 8&9, which actually increased. Also, the confidence levels with regard to passing the first year were reduced for all groups with the exception of group 1, which remained static. However, all groups showed marked increases in positive responses to the university expectation statement.



These findings were unexpected. Although it was expected that more traditional students (1,2,3 and 4) would have higher levels of academic confidence before the intervention, as indeed they had, it was also expected that these would rise after the Summer School, as had that of group 8&9. This was evidently not the case. Similarly, it was expected that students would feel more confident about passing their first year after Flying Start, when in fact, these responses became more negative for all groups. The responses to academic criteria statements would seem to illustrate a negative impact on student's confidence. However, the same students also completed feedback forms after Flying Start, in which they indicated far higher levels of confidence regarding undergraduate study.

This feedback revealed areas of common concern and indicated that issues relating to academic, social, and personal confidence combined with apprehension and ignorance regarding university life as a whole were very pertinent to all students. These have been classified into the following categories:

- **General Insight /Valuable Experience:** concerns whether the student has found the Flying Start Summer School a positive or useful experience.
- **University Expectations:** this category refers to a student's increased knowledge of what will be expected of them (academic standards, deadlines, etc.). Statements, such as: "*I have learned that I must manage my time to get my work in on time*" are logged as a positive response.
- **Personal Doubts & Worries:** refers to student statements indicating greater self-confidence with regard to attending university, such as: "*I am no longer scared of coming to University in September*" and "*I learned that I was good in a team.*"
- **Orientation City/Campus:** many students commented on the importance of increased familiarity with the University campus and Preston with comments such as: "*The survival course was helpful in getting to know different areas of the Uni and places around Preston.*"
- **Lecture Content:** refers to specific, positive feedback from students about academic/practical matters covered in lectures and seminars such as "*I found the time management exercise very interesting and I will certainly take these ideas on board*"
- **Social confidence:** this category is concerned with very specific statements e.g. "*I have made good friends*" rather than the more nebulous comments about "*enjoying socialising*".

Of the 123 students attending the August Summer School, 94 completed feedback forms, however many of the students gave little information on their feedback forms other than a non-specific general approval of Flying Start, but the data below shows the amount of specific feedback received. The analysis reveals substantive improvement in these areas of particular concern to prospective students:

Sample 94 students. (August 2002)

General Insight/ Val. experience	University Expectation	Personal/Doubts/ Worries/Conduct	Orientation City/Campus	Lecture Content	Social Confidence
100%	32.9%	47.8%	34%	41.5%	43%
Students	Students	Students mention	Students	Students	Students feel

found F/S a valuable experience.	mention as improved	as improved	mention as pos. important exercise	mention as useful	happier about socialisation
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The discrepancies between feedback and questionnaire responses may be attributed to a ‘pre-post- then effect’ in which a student’s confidence with regard to their competences may have changed with reference to the intervention. For example, when students are informed of lateness penalties for assignments confidence in their time management skill may wane, despite an overall improvement in these skills. The terms of reference have changed, that is, what may have been acceptable in Further Education in terms of lateness will be penalised at university. Hence, an increase in realistic expectation, but a decrease in an unrealistic confidence. In essence students have moved through a stage of ‘unconscious ignorance’ to a state of ‘conscious ignorance’.

Conclusion

Throughout the Project we have been aware that those students who attended the Summer Schools might be more engaged with the University in the first instance. The decision to attend is the students and in this sense the students are self-selecting. It is probable, therefore, that Flying Start students are more committed towards HE in general and to UCLan in particular than students who did not accept the invitation. However, we still feel it safe to assume that the sustained favourable or very favourable comparisons between the Flying Start and non-Flying Start students in terms of retention are an important measure of the success of the intervention. This is further evidenced by the 90% retention rate of students who attended the Clearing Summer School in 2001 and the high retention rate of students who attended the 2002 Clearing Summer School. Neither of these cohorts had any prior commitment to the institution. However, as tracking continues, before and after questionnaires will be refined to address this issue more methodically.

Analysis of cohort data to date reveals some stark differences between social groups. The lowest groups, for example, perceived themselves as having had far less parental and school encouragement to go to university than the highest group. Other factors, however, transcend social groupings. All students displayed high motivation and had worries over money management. Before the Summer School all students believed that they would not make friends easily. Only 40% of the highest social group, for example, thought peer friendship would be easy, so it is not safe to assume an automatic correlation between high social class and high social capital. However, only 10% of the lowest social group believed that they would make friends easily, a figure which suggests significantly lower social confidence. Given this, it is pleasing to note that an increase in social capital across all groups following the Summer School is the single most significant finding of the research to date, with the highest increase appearing within the lowest social groups.

It is also pleasing to note that since the staffing base of the Flying Start Project has recently been made substantive the Project is set to become a permanent aspect of the University’s student support services and will continue to provide an evidence base to inform its emerging retention strategy.

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