Access and Widening Participation in College HE

Briefing Paper 2: Student Retention. Attainment and Experience in College-Based Higher Education
May 2015

Author: Liz Thomas, Action on Access
Introduction
This is the second in a series of briefings on aspects of college higher education (HE) sponsored by Association of Colleges (AoC) and Action on Access. The briefings describe key concepts and models of practice and realistic ways to implement widening participation policies and practices. The briefings will be useful for all colleges that receive the HEFCE student opportunity grant. The other guidance notes in this series of briefings will examine:

- Measures and indicators;
- Effective and collaborative outreach;
- Evaluation.

Context
This briefing focuses on student retention, attainment and experience in higher education (HE) in the college sector in England. It includes contextual information about the issues, examples of how colleges are responding to the challenges, research about effective practice, and reflective questions to develop thinking and action to bring about improvements.

In the UK two measures of student retention are commonly used with respect to full-time undergraduates, as identified by the National Audit Office (NAO):

*The first is the ‘completion rate’ – the proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies until they obtain their qualification, with no more than one consecutive year out of HE. As HE courses take years to complete... a more immediate measure of retention is the proportion of an institution’s intake which is enrolled in higher education in the year following their first entry to higher education. This is the ‘continuation rate’. (NAO, 2007, p.5)*

- In general, the continuation rates are slightly lower for students registered and studying HE programmes in colleges than in HE institutions (HEIs) (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2012 and 2013);
- Of full-time first degree entrants registered at college, 13.6% did not continue after their first year; and of those taught in colleges (regardless of where they were registered) 14.0% did not continue;
- With respect to young full-time first degree entrants, 12.8% among those registered at colleges did not continue into a second year of HE, compared with 7.1% of students registered at HEIs. For young full-time entrants to other undergraduate programmes registered at colleges, the non-continuation rate is 20.6% compared with a rate of 17.2% among those registered at HEIs;
- 21.6% of mature entrants registered at colleges did not continue after their first year compared with 13.8% of mature students registered at HEIs;
however these rates are broadly in line other providers of ‘other undergraduate programmes’. (All data from HEFCE 2013).

In addition to continuation rates there is growing awareness about other outcomes:

- achieving a degree (retention and completion);
- achieving a first or upper second class degree (attainment);
- achieving a degree and continuing to employment or further study (employability); and
- achieving a degree and continuing to graduate employment (as opposed to any employment) or postgraduate study (graduate progression) (HEFCE 2013).

The Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey and the Higher Education in Further Education Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey (HEFCE 2013a) provide some insight into the relative performance of college-based HE. The analysis finds that in 2010-11 the proportion of registered qualifiers who went on to work or further study was higher at HEIs than further education (FE) colleges. The proportion of full-time first degree qualifiers from FE colleges was 83.6%, compared 90.0% employment proportion observed at HEIs.

Who is at risk?

- **Entry qualification level:** higher qualified students are more likely to continue in HE, compared to those who enter with lower entry grades (NAO 2007, Arulampalam, Naylor and Smith 2004). In the context of college-based HE the average entry-level qualification was 182 UCAS points (excluding the 12% of the students whose courses did not have a UCAS equivalent) (Schofield and Dismore, 2010). Those who completed their course had achieved a 30-point higher UCAS point on entry than those who withdrew and failed.

- **Entry qualification type:** the evidence suggests that entry route affects retention and completion, with A Levels having higher rates of continuation than those with other qualifications, including Access to HE courses and vocational qualifications (Curtis 2007, Dent 2007, Wharrad, Chapple, and Price 2003). In the context of college-based HE, Schofield and Dismore (2010) found that A Level students were the most likely to complete and least likely to fail. The students transferring from other HE programmes were also highly likely to pass and less likely to withdraw. Vocational students were more likely to withdraw whereas students who entered directly from the workplace were least likely to complete and most likely to fail. They find that qualification type had a particularly significant effect on achievement.

- **Entry route:** some research evidence finds that those entering through clearing are more likely to withdraw (Curtis 2007). Schofield and Dismore (2010) found that those students who applied through clearing were twice as likely to withdraw or fail than to complete successfully.
The most recent analysis of key trends in non-continuation in HE, though not college-based HE in particular (HEFCE 2014) finds the following student groups to be at risk of non-continuation (i.e. did not continue into the second year of studying):

- **Age**: In 2011-12, mature entrants were more likely to leave (10.4%) compared with young entrants (5.7%).
- **Subject**: Computer science had the highest percentage of entrants no longer in HE in 2011-12 compared with other subjects (11%). Medicine and dentistry had the lowest rate (1.9%).
- **Gender**: Women (5.9%) were less likely to not continue their studies than men (7.6%) in 2011-12. But men (2.1%) and women (2.0%) transferred to a different English HEI at similar rates.
- **Ethnicity**: Black entrants had the highest rate of non-continuation (9.4%) in 2011-12, and Chinese entrants had the lowest (5.2%).
- **Disability**: Non-disabled entrants were less likely to remain in HE (7.8% in 2011-12) than disabled entrants (6.2%).
- **Social background**: Entrants from areas with low participation in HE were more likely than entrants in high participation areas to no longer be in HE at the end of year one: this is the case for both young and mature age groups.
- **School**: A higher percentage of state-school entrants (6.5%) did not continue in HE compared with independent school entrants (3.5%) in 2011-12.
- **Location**: London (9.0%) and the North West region (7.7%) had the highest percentage of non-continuation while the South West (5.3%) had the lowest in 2011-12. London had the highest percentage of entrants transferring, while the North East had the lowest.

**What are the issues?**

There are both internal and external reasons why students withdraw from HE. Some withdrawals are voluntary while others are compulsory or required. Internal reasons are within the control of the HEI, while external reasons are outside of the institutional sphere, usually within the student's private life. Voluntary reasons emphasise students' choice, while compulsory reasons imply that the student has no alternative.

Institutions should focus on improving the internal factors that result in voluntary withdrawal (e.g. inappropriate course choice/course not as expected, poor student experience, etc.). These factors are within the institution's control; it may also be possible to ameliorate the effect of some external factors (e.g. balancing other commitments, financial problems), and to review whether institutional policies or practices are unintentionally increasing compulsory withdrawal (e.g. if a particular module has a very high failure rate it may be appropriate to review learning, teaching and assessment practices in this module). External factors that make withdrawal compulsory (e.g. severe ill health, family re-location) are the areas where the HEI is least able to make an impact.
There is a lack of data and research about retention, attainment and student experience in college HE, and some colleges are uncertain about their capacity to improve retention. A brief review of research and practice relating to student retention, attainment and success in college-based HE was undertaken for this briefing. It identifies the following issues:

- **Poor choice of programme** by the student, leading to a mismatch of expectations, abilities and aspirations with regards to progression (i.e. to employment or further study). This may be due to lack of support in finding information and choosing an appropriate course, or due to ‘last minute decision making’. Schofield and Dismore (2010) identified those who chose late and/or entered through clearing were more likely to withdraw.

- **Low confidence** in students about their ability and identity as an effective learner in higher education (Wilson, Thurgate et al 2007, Turner et al 2009 et al). This may be particularly true of students without a family or school tradition of participating in higher education.

- **Academic skills**, particularly academic writing may present a challenge to students (Tierney and Slack 2005, Wilson 2013), and result either in academic failure, or student anxiety about academic failure and subsequent withdrawal.

- **Lack of preparation for independent learning** (Burkhardt, 2015, Thomas et al 2015, Turner et al 2009, Wilson 2013), which can reduce confidence, impact on the quality of the experience or reduce academic attainment.

- **Lack of knowledge of support** for pastoral issues or academic development - available either from the college or from a partner HEI (Wilson 2013). This may reduce use of services.

- **Lack of identity as an HE student** (Wilson 2013), leading to a questioning of self-worth or the value of the programme.

- **Financial issues** (Tierney and Slack 2005, Wylie 2014), impacting negatively on the student experience and/or attainment, or resulting in withdrawal. These may be more significant for mature students with more (financial) responsibilities.

**Current approach**

A review of access agreements demonstrates that colleges are committed to improving student retention, attainment and success. Frequently used approaches include:

- tutorial support;
- peer mentoring;
- pre-entry support;
- improved induction and information, advice and guidance (IAG);
- study skills and catch up sessions;
- some identification of at risk learners;
• monitoring attendance; and
• provision of financial support.

The following examples illustrate some ways in which the college sector is seeking to improve HE student retention, attainment and experience.

Examples

Student self-assessment and feedback tool

Stockport College introduced a self-assessment tool to improve students understanding of HE assessment tasks and better communicate with staff about their work. The approach consisted of an ‘instant feedback sheet’ with evaluative statements on structure, content and academic style. Students were asked to reflect on their submitted work in relation to these statements. This enabled them to voice their opinion about their work (strengths, weaknesses and uncertainties) and raise particular issues for feedback. This approach has had mixed reviews but represents a useful attempt to develop students’ academic writing skills, their confidence and their capacity as independent learners (Shaffi and Savage, 2013).

Developing student skills and confidence as independent learners

The University Centre at Blackburn College (UCBC) is keen to promote and encourage independent learning. To achieve this as early as possible the initial assessment for the Department of English Language and Literature 'Introduction to Literature' module undertaken in the first semester was changed to allow students to select a poem of their own choosing for their assignment. Some students enjoyed this freedom: others panicked at the prospect, being unsure and concerned about doing the assignment ‘incorrectly’ not appreciating that text selection was part of the assessment. In a subsequent assignment students felt more confident to choose for themselves. Further engagement with students revealed limited understanding of independent learning in HE. Departmental staff are still working to develop student independent learning in a supported and structured way (Burkhardt, 2015).

Higher education study day

The foundation degree in Integrated Practice (FDIP) is delivered at Edge Hill University (EHU) and two partner FE colleges. EHU staff organise a study day for the students to assist their transition from Level 4 to Level 5 study. The aim is to encourage a feeling of identity as successful students; allay the fears and anxieties of those transferring to an HE environment; and prepare them for academic writing at Level 5. Sessions include:

• a welcome from the Head, Applied Health and Social Care Team;
• information sessions from the Student Union, Finance and Learning Services; and
• a practical session on writing at level 5, including academic expectations; marking and critiquing assignments; and referencing.

Students gained awareness of support available from the university, developed new skills and gained confidence in their identity as HE students (Wilson, 2013).

**Additional student financial support**

The student support package at Reaseheath College is designed to capture those at the most risk of withdrawal or non-completion. In order to ensure the success of the flagship £1,000 attendance-based ‘Reaseheath Bursary’ (RHB), eligible students are directly targeted using Student Loans Company (SLC) application data and college databases. This means that the college can say with a degree of certainty that the support does reach the students it is designed to help. Early research has shown there is an association between success and bursary recipients, with 45.7% of RHB recipients graduating with a BSc (Hons) at First Class or a Distinction at Foundation Degree level. Moving forward, the college is looking at expanding the additional support package to provide assistance to part-time and mature students which specifically addresses their requirements as well as expanding this idea of ‘institutional investment’ in students by providing eligible students with tangible benefits such as key texts for their programme of study.

**Student monitoring and support**

In 2010-11 Myerscough College introduced a new ‘At Risk System’ to identify students who might not achieve their target grade, learning outcomes or qualifications; and to enable intervention and support to be given. In 2011-12 the system was changed to the Student Support Register, to integrate the central student record and electronic individual learning plans for each student. The purpose of the Student Support Register is to assist early identification of student concerns (personal, financial, social or academic) at all stages of the student journey in order to offer an appropriate level of support to improve retention, achievement and the student experience. The interventions to develop and support the student are discussed during personal tutorials and recorded on the electronic individual learning plan. The evidence suggests that this proactive approach is helping students to overcome challenges and provides college-wide insights into the issues HE students are experiencing (Myerscough College case study).
Research and evidence from the higher education sector

The above examples demonstrate that there is a lack of understanding about what works best to improve student retention, attainment and experience in college-based HE.

Drawing on the research evidence (Thomas 2012) and the current Action on Access-Higher Education Academy (HEA) work with institutions as part of the What works? Student retention and success change programme the following lessons can be extracted:

**Institutional leadership and commitment:** a commitment to improving student retention, attainment and experience must be explicit within institutional leadership, strategy and policies. There are many pressures and demands on staff, so they need to know that this is a top priority.

**All staff to take responsibility:** improving student retention, attainment and experience requires all staff to play a role. This may involve reviewing work allocation models, staff monitoring and appraisal, induction, training and development, and reward and recognition.

**Good quality data:** a single agreed source of data is required to understand the issues, and to identify the issues and priorities for change. Ideally this needs to be real time data, and it needs to be available and comprehensible to all staff.

**Partnership between students, academic staff and professional service staff:** a more effective and sustainable way of implementing change, rather than one group assuming they have all the answers.

**Evidence informed approach:** drawing on national research, institutional analysis and the student voice will help to create evidence informed interventions and approaches.

**Academic and mainstream:** interventions and approaches to improve student retention and success should as far as possible be embedded into mainstream academic provision to ensure all students participate and benefit from them. This will improve the retention of some students and contribute to maximising the attainment, experience and outcomes for all.

**Proactive:** activities should proactively seek to engage students, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur, or for only the more motivated students to take up opportunities. Students who most need support are the least likely to come forward voluntarily. An ‘opt-out’ rather than ‘opt-in’ approach should be the norm, and particular attention should be paid to students who opt-out, with additional support provided if necessary. If the college has an opt-in approach then it is important to make it transparent for how students can and should engage, and why.

**Relevant:** activities need to be informative, useful and relevant to students’ current interests and future aspirations. The potential benefits of engaging should be explicit to students, as they do not always appreciate the relevance of particular activities.
**Well-timed and appropriate media:** early engagement is essential. Other information may be better delivered at a later date or via an alternative media as students’ needs will differ. Some activities benefit from taking place over time rather than being delivered as one-off opportunities.

**Collaborative:** activities should encourage collaboration and engagement between fellow students and with members of staff.

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

**Evaluation:** evaluating interventions and approaches is important to develop the evidence base in the college-based HE sector, and to inform future work.

**What next: Reflective questions**

1. To what extent is improving student retention, attainment and success explicitly an institutional priority? How is this communicated to our staff and students?

2. What do we already know about student retention, attainment and experience in HE at our college? Which of our students are most likely to withdraw and why? Which of our programmes have the highest rates of withdrawal and why? When are our students leaving and why?

3. What do our students say about retention, attainment and experience, including those who have left? Are there opportunities to make greater use of the student voice through the representative systems or qualitative research?

4. In what ways is our college helping to inform, guide and improve students’ decision making about course choice?

5. How do our academic programmes develop the skills, confidence and identity of students as higher education learners?

6. How are our students supported and enabled within the college environment to become confident independent learners?

7. To what extent is student participation and engagement monitored to identify students those who may need additional support?

8. Which of our current interventions and approaches are effective?

9. How do we share effective practice across the college and beyond?
References


https://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/ncr/


