



Engaging students to improve student retention and success in higher education in Wales

Edited by Liz Thomas and Ceredig Jamieson-Ball

	Acknowledgements	2
1	Introduction	3
2	Widening access, retention and student success in Wales: the policy context	4
3	Improving student retention and success	8
4	'What works? Student retention and success' programme	10
5	Student engagement to improve retention and success model	11
6	Practical implications for institutions	22
7	Case studies	
7.1	Aberystwyth University – Retention matters: an holistic approach	22
7.2	Cardiff School of Management, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff – Bridging the gap: an educational partnership working to make a clear progression route from school to higher education for underachieving pupils from deprived communities	28
7.3	Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE), Swansea University – BA Humanities part-time degree	31
7.4	Nursing Programme, Glyndŵr University – Written feed forward	34
7.5	School of Psychology and Counselling, Swansea Metropolitan University – 'Heads Up!'	37
7.6	Swansea Metropolitan University – Recognising helping	38
7.7	Cardiff University, School of Engineering – Design, Make & Test	39
7.8	Centre for Community and Lifelong Learning, University of Wales, Newport – Recruitment and retention strategies with non-traditional learners	41
7.9	Bangor University – Support to retain	43
7.10	University of Wales Institute, Cardiff – Listening to the student voice: the development of innovative induction projects to promote effective transition and early engagements	46
7.11	University of Wales Trinity Saint David – Y Cwad	49
7.12	Glyndŵr University – Continual assessment in computing subjects	52
7.13	Student Money Service, Student Services, University of Glamorgan – Money Week	55
7.14	University of Glamorgan – Who cares wins	57
7.15	The Open University in Wales – Proactive student support	60
8	Moving forward towards a strategy for student engagement, retention and success	62
9	Reflective questions	64
10	Further information and resources	67

Acknowledgements

The editors are grateful to all the institutions that have willingly shared examples of their work to enhance student retention and success, and we are particularly keen to acknowledge the effort of the individuals who supplied the case study information. We also acknowledge the contribution of the *What works? Student retention and success programme* to this publication, including the research and evaluation undertaken by the seven projects and the meta-analysis undertaken by Helen May. We are pleased to acknowledge the support the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales has given to this publication. This includes co-organising the *Improving retention and success* conference in Llandrindod Wells in May 2010, encouraging and enabling us to prepare this report, and contributing material on the retention in Wales. We would like to especially thank Jane Johns, Senior Widening Access Policy Manager, HEFCW.

I Introduction

In May 2010 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) organised a conference entitled 'Improving retention and success: retaining students to and through higher education'¹. The conference was attended by institutions from across Wales and beyond, and discussed theoretical, practical and policy issues relating to improving student retention and success.

This publication draws on the conference by presenting:

- an overview of student retention and success in Wales;
- a summary of the conceptual model 'student engagement to improve student retention and success' developed as part of the 'What works? student retention and success' programme;
- illustrative examples from Welsh higher education institutions (HEIs) that relate to and demonstrate the key elements of the conceptual model;
- future priorities for Welsh higher education institutions, including reflective questions on strategy development.

This publication complements the work of the first-year experience action set in Wales, who have produced two practical guides that share experiences of developing initiatives designed to support and enhance the first-year student experience in Wales². It also provides a theoretical framework connecting student engagement, which underpins the examples in the first-year experience publications, with student retention and success.

1 Further details and presentations available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2010/jointevents/12_May_2010_Improving_Retention_and_success.

2 The two first-year experience practice guides (2009 and 2010) are available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/wales/ourwork/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=ourwork/nations/wales/first_year_experience_wales_oct09&site=york.

2 Widening access, retention and student success in Wales: the policy context

Jane Johns

2.1 Welsh Assembly Government expectations

For our Future, the Welsh Assembly Government's strategy for higher education, published in November 2009, sets a clear framework for the development of higher education in Wales from³. *For our Future* sets out the Assembly Government's expectations in relation to widening access, retention and student success, including requiring a renewed approach to widening access that should:

... include a stronger focus on helping those who access higher education to successfully complete their learning objectives.

2.2 HEFCW's Corporate Strategy

HEFCW's *Corporate Strategy 2010–11 – 2012–13*, and the agreed action plan for delivering *For our Future*, identifies widening access, including retention, as a key strategic theme the purpose of which is to:

... ensure equity, opportunity and success in higher education⁴.

To determine the increase in the number of students who successfully complete their learning objectives, our Corporate Strategy measure is:

A 2.7% rise in the module completion rate for undergraduate enrolments in Welsh higher education institutions from 87.6% in 2008/09 to 90% in 2012/13.

This Wales-specific module completion measure focuses on the achievement of elements of courses. Module data recognise the extensive use of the Credit and

3 Welsh Assembly Government (2009) *For our Future the twenty first century higher education strategy and plan for Wales*. Available from: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/091125hedocen.pdf>.

4 HEFCW (2010) *Corporate Strategy 2010–11 – 2012–13*. Available from: www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/corporate_documents/corporate_strategy.aspx

Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) and HEFCW's funding by credit (unlike in other parts of the UK). These mechanisms enable Welsh universities to offer flexible, modular provision. Such provision provides more transition points where non-continuation is possible and desirable, for example for part-time students or employees. These data, for Wales only, as a part-time study indicator, are available in the Higher Education Statistics Agency performance indicator datasets⁵. We have used these data to inform our *For our Future* measure, but we have also taken account of both full-time and part-time undergraduate module completion data.

2.3 HEFCW's Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education 2010/11 to 2012/13

In January 2011, we published *HEFCW's Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education 2010/11 to 2012/13*⁶ (our *Approach*). Our *Approach* sits beneath our Corporate Strategy and sets out in more detail our direction of travel and agenda for action. Prioritising student learning, retention and success is a key strategic objective of our *Approach*. Indeed, this publication has arisen partly in response to our initial retention-related actions, which require us to:

- measure sector progress against a fundable target for module completion as included in our Corporate Strategy;
- monitor annually HE non-completion rates, with particular emphasis on underrepresented groups;
- monitor annually the outcomes of the National Student Survey to respond to students' experiences, identify areas of concern and promote effective practice in student engagement;
- identify and share effective practice on retention;
- work with the Higher Education Academy to provide leadership in developing and disseminating evidence-informed practice to enhance the student learning experience.

5 Higher Education Statistics Agency website: www.hesa.ac.uk

6 HEFCW (2011) *HEFCW's Strategic Approach and Plan for Widening Access to Higher Education 2010/11 to 2012/13*. Available from: www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars.

2.4 Welsh and UK comparative performance

When assessing sector retention and student success performance, we recognise that institutions' retention profiles can be influenced by entrants' academic and socio-economic profiles as well as by the actions universities take to improve retention and success. While we recognise that retention issues are not completely synonymous with widening access issues, an institutional culture of student success and retention is beneficial to widening access students and all students.

We recognise that the sector will also be mindful of its retention and non-continuation performance relative to the rest of the UK. In this context there are a number of datasets available. These datasets each provide a partial picture of performance, given that they each measure different student cohorts and outcomes. The UK **non-continuation following year of entry performance indicators** (PIs) are limited to **full-time individuals**. These data suggest that, generally, Wales does less well than the UK average. This information is in the public domain⁷. **Completion of the year of programme data confirm that individuals have completed a year of study, but do not confirm progression to the following year or successful completion of all modules**. These data are not in the public domain. Finally, there are the **Higher Education Statistics Agency benchmarks included in each of the PIs**. In the recent benchmark datasets, the majority of Welsh universities have either maintained their position or improved their performance against their benchmarks, in a context where overall the benchmarks have risen⁸. A summary of some key features for Wales of the above data is available from our website⁹.

7 HESA performance indicators: www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/category/2/32/129/

8 For more information about UK higher education institution benchmarks see: www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/Benchmarking_to_improve_efficiency_Nov2010.pdf

9 HEFCW analysis of UK performance indicators: www.hefcw.ac.uk/about_he_in_wales/statistics/uk_performance_indicators.aspx

2.5 Funding mechanism to support retention and success

We recognise that universities employ a range of resources to support widening access, retention and student success. In confirming changes to the funding system for higher education in Wales (circular W11/07HE), we recognise the additional costs to institutions of retaining students and ensuring their success by including new retention-related premia: the Access and Retention premia¹⁰. The premia comprise: a Communities First premium; a UK 'postcode premium'; and an Assembly Learning Grant premium. The new Access and Retention premia provide a lower allocation for first-year students and a slightly higher sum for those retained in subsequent years: to reward retention. We recognise that the proportion of widening access students within an institution will impact on the extent of retention-related support that universities will be required to make and the premium model accounts for this. In addition, the premia provide a higher allocation for Communities First students than for the other two groups to recognise our Corporate Strategy priorities in relation to Communities First students.

10 See www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/circulars/circulars.aspx

3 Improving student retention and success

Liz Thomas and Helen May

Most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation¹¹.

Much is known about why students leave higher education (HE). There is rarely a single reason why students leave. In most cases, the picture is complex and students leave as a result of a combination of interrelated factors. The HEA retention research synthesis¹² identified the following categories of reasons why students withdraw:

1. poor preparation for higher education;
2. weak institutional and/or course match, resulting in poor fit/lack of commitment;
3. unsatisfactory academic experience;
4. lack of social integration;
5. financial issues;
6. personal circumstances.

11 Tinto, V. (2006) *Keynote address at Innovations in Student Success Conference*. London, Higher Education Academy Conference, 9 February.

12 Jones, R. (2008) *Student retention and success: a synthesis of research*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/inclusion/wprs/WPRS_retention_synthesis.

Furthermore, the synthesis presents evidence to suggest that the following types of intervention promote student retention and success:

1. pre-entry information, preparation and admission;
2. induction and transition support;
3. curriculum development;
4. social engagement;
5. student support, including financial support;
6. data and monitoring.

At a strategic level Yorke and Longden¹³ suggest that an institutional commitment to student learning (and hence to student engagement), proactive management of student transition, curriculum issues such as treating learning as an academic and social milieu, and choosing curricular structures that increase the chances of student success, contribute to good student retention.

It is challenging, however, to convert this knowledge about why students leave and the factors that help them to stay into institutional interventions or a strategy that improves student retention and success.

13 Yorke, M. and Longden, B. (2008) *The First Year Experience of Higher Education in the UK*. York: Higher Education Academy. Available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/publications/FYEFinalReport.pdf

4 'What works? Student retention and success' programme¹⁴ *Liz Thomas and Helen May*

The 'What works? Student retention and success' programme¹⁵ funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England aims to generate robust evidence about effective approaches to ensure high continuation and completion rates within higher education. There are seven projects funded by the programme, involving 22 HEIs in England and beyond¹⁶. The projects are evaluating the effectiveness and impact of one or more intervention and/or identifying the institutional factors that contribute to high levels of student retention and success. Literature from the UK, US and Australia, together with a meta-analysis of the interim project findings is informing the development a conceptual model of student retention and success¹⁷.

14 This document draws on the forthcoming 2011 publication *What works? Student retention and success programme interim publication*, by Liz Thomas and Helen May. The model is still in development.

15 For more details, see www.actiononaccess.org/retention.

16 Bangor University is a partner in 'Pathways to success: The value of peer mentoring in enhancing student transition to higher education' and Glyndŵr University is a partner in 'Dispositions to learn and student success'.

17 Thomas, L. and May, H. (forthcoming) *What works? Student retention and success programme interim publication*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

5 Student engagement to improve retention and success model

Liz Thomas and Helen May

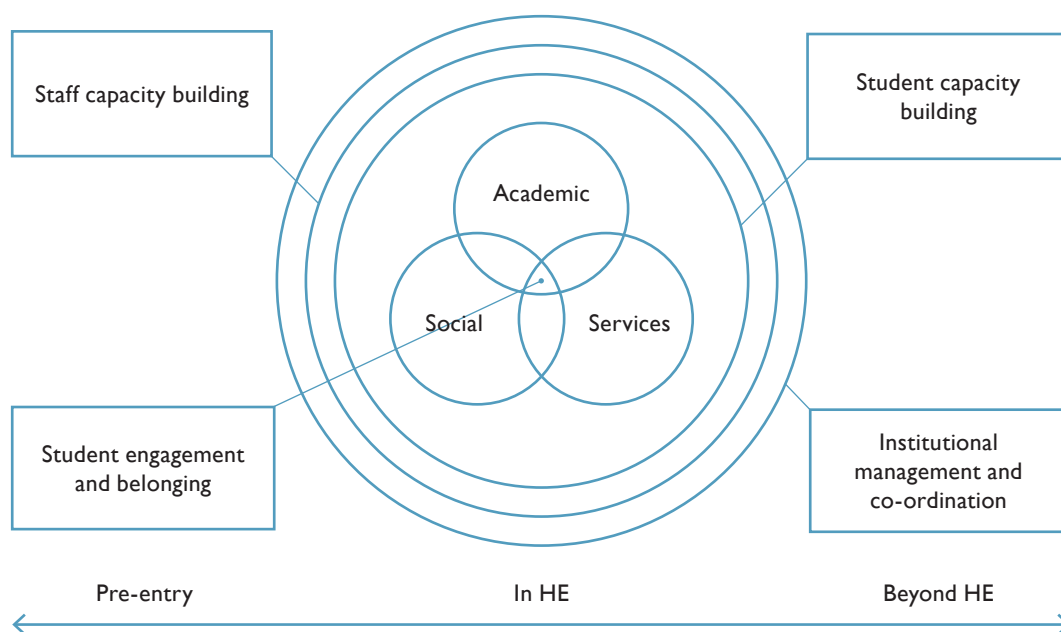
Analysis of the ‘What works?’ interim project reports points to the centrality of student engagement to enhance retention and success in HE. This echoes research work in the US and Australia that also emphasises the importance of student engagement to improve student persistence in HE¹⁸. If students are able to engage with peers, institutional staff and the institution per se, then they are less likely to feel like outsiders and more likely to feel like they belong in HE:

Student engagement lies at the heart of retention and success and therefore offers institutions the answer to their improvement. Essentially institutions need to attend to not just the number and range of interventions or services they provide, but the quality and extent of the students’ interactions with those as well as the institution more broadly. Successful higher education depends on a partnership between a student and the institution they attend¹⁹.

The emerging evidence from the ‘What works?’ programme is pointing to the importance of collaborative, student-centred learning and teaching strategies²⁰. These facilitate staff and student interaction, enabling students to develop academically and staff to have a better understanding of their students. These learning approaches also promote peer interaction and the development of long-lasting friendships. Engagement, however, can take place beyond the academic domain, in other spheres of the institution, and can have a positive impact on students’ retention and success too.

-
- 18 James, R., Krause, K., and Jennings, C. (2010) *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994–2009*. Available from: www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/FYE_Report_1994_to_2009.pdf; and Kuh, G.D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J.H., Whitt, E.J. and associates (2005) *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- 19 Thomas, L. and May, H. (forthcoming) *What works? Student retention and success programme interim publication*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
- 20 See Crosling, G., Thomas, L. and Heagney, M. (eds.) (2008) *Improving student retention in higher education*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

Figure 1: Student engagement to improve student retention and success



The conceptual model focuses on institutional transformation²¹ to enhance student engagement across the institution to improve retention and success. This recognises that HEIs should focus on what is within their control to influence and that they can only change themselves rather than wishing for a more homogenous or traditional student body. The model reflects the importance of providing opportunities for student engagement across the student life cycle and throughout the institution in the academic, social and professional service spheres. It also recognises that it is essential for students and staff to be enabled to work together, and that institutions need to manage, co-ordinate, monitor and evaluate student engagement, retention and success. The model is discussed in more detail below and illustrated with examples from the Welsh higher education sector.

21 Jones, R. and Thomas, L. (2005) The 2003 UK government higher education white paper: a critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda. *Journal of Education Policy*. 20 (5), pp. 615–30.

Aberystwyth University has developed a suite of interventions across the student life cycle and spread through the academic, social and professional service areas, reflecting key elements of the conceptual model. As is stated in the case study, “this approach fosters strong peer relations, helps develop the student as an individual, values him/her within the institution, and helps each student to obtain the confidence and ability to access the learning, skills and support needed to succeed in HE and beyond”.

Other institutions have pre-entry interventions designed to improve student engagement, retention and success. For example, undergraduate volunteers from Cardiff School of Management at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff visit school and college students in Years 11–13 at key decision-making points. This volunteering programme has a strong focus on helping students to make appropriate decisions in school and college to fulfil their career aspirations, contributing to a longitudinal approach to student engagement and success.

5.1 Academic sphere

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

Student engagement in the academic sphere entails a move from a teacher-centred paradigm to a learner-centred paradigm, in which students construct knowledge through a more active and authentic learning process facilitated by academic staff, rather than relying on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. This constructivist learning paradigm has implications for pedagogy, including group learning, participative activities, feedback and formative assessment²².

The emerging evidence from the ‘What works?’ projects indicates:

- the importance of the HEI providing opportunities for staff and students to build and sustain their ongoing relationships and dialogue;
- the potential for learning and teaching to facilitate peer interaction and the development of friendships;

22 See note 12.

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

The part-time BA Humanities degree at Swansea University exhibits many of these features of an engaging academic experience. In particular, staff develop their knowledge of and relationships with students over a long period of time. Staff are selected for their experience of working with adults and are given time to develop detailed understanding of their student cohorts and use this information to inform their curriculum contents and pedagogy: staff and students use their own personal experiences to bring academic subjects alive. The supportive approach used in this programme by the Department of Adult Continuing Education at Swansea University, which includes a student-centred curriculum and delivery, contributes to a high rate of retention and success for these part-time students.

At Glyndŵr University pre-registration Nursing students were consulted about how academic staff could proactively help them to maximise their success. The majority of students asked for 'feed forward' on a draft of their first assignment to assist them to learn about assessment requirements and to enable them to develop academically from Level 3 to 4. Prior to this intervention, students submitted their first Level 4 assignment and only received written feedback after their marks were finalised. The majority of students reported a positive impact on their academic development and ability to succeed through a better understanding of requirements and increased confidence in particular.

5.2 Social sphere

The social sphere encompasses the provision of formal and informal activities that are not explicitly educationally orientated. Friendship and peer support are critical to many students' decisions to stay in HE²³. Institutions can contribute to this by providing or facilitating peer networks, offering free, informal spaces for meeting

23 Thomas, L. (2002) Student Retention in Higher Education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*. 17 (4), pp. 423–432; and Wilcox, P., Winn, S. and Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005) 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*. 30 (6), pp. 707–722.

up, organising social and extra-curricular activities (both on and off campus) and accrediting non-academic experiences such as volunteering and part-time employment. These experiences enable students to make friends and engage more widely in the opportunities available, both of which contribute to their success. The academic sphere can play a central role in facilitating students to develop these friendships.

The emerging evidence from the 'What works?' projects suggests:

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

Swansea Metropolitan University is setting up two new interventions designed to assist students to develop peer networks in the early phases of their student journey. 'Heads Up!' allows students to start meeting peers and socialising in a virtual context before they arrive at university. The 'Recognising Helping' scheme offers applicants who have accepted a place at the University the opportunity to have an existing student as a 'buddy' who can provide friendship, peer support and information about the University. This relationship can be formally maintained throughout the new student's first year to ease the transition and engender a sense of entitlement and belonging. Both of these are new interventions, but they offer students a semi-structured way of making new friends when entering HE, which are likely to support them in and beyond the early days.

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

5.3 Professional service sphere

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

The emerging findings from the 'What works?' projects suggest:

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

The Centre for Community and Lifelong Learning at the University of Wales, Newport delivers courses to learners in the community and has integrated academic development and pastoral support into this process. In the early phases, interactions between staff and students enable tutors to develop an understanding of the individuals and the group. Pedagogy is based on identifying learning needs and developing and implementing an individual plan to enable them to be successful. Tutors play a central role in identifying students who might withdraw and intervening to support them academically and pastorally. Students have a close relationship with staff, which promotes open discussion about concerns. In addition, each student group has a strong social bond, and students feel that they can rely upon their peers for support and feel 'safe' to make mistakes in the group.

The part-time BA Humanities degree delivered by the Department of Adult Continuing Education at Swansea University has a similar ethos, integrating academic development and pastoral support into this programme. This includes providing help

with childcare, help with funding issues, support for students with disabilities, flexibility in timetabling to cater for students with caring responsibilities, impartial educational advice and guidance, a specific preparatory programme offered on campus and in community venues, and extensive study skills support.

In the spirit of offering students a range of services, Bangor University provides drop-in study skills and maths support for students, particular in the first weeks of term, and at other strategic points. In the pilot, study skills workshops were offered during Welcome Week. However, the demands on students' time during this week meant that even students interested in the workshops were not able to access them. One of the features of the study skills and maths support is that it is anonymous, and some students welcome this, as numbers using the services are growing.

The Cardiff School of Management at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff helps develop the skills of both school/college students and undergraduates through its volunteering programme. School and college students gain access to information, advice and guidance to inform pre-entry decision making. Undergraduates gain confidence and experience in leadership, teamwork and project management, which enhances their CVs. Students are encouraged and enabled to participate in the programme, which has academic credit attached to it. The accreditation of the module enables the development of employability skills to be undertaken as part of the academic sphere, rather than relying on students being able to devote additional time to engage with the careers services or student volunteering.

5.4 Centrality of the academic sphere

Many students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds spend less time in higher education institutions than their peers because they have other commitments such as family, employment and community, and are more exclusively focused on academic achievement. Evidence suggests they are less likely to engage with student services²⁴ and with careers services²⁵, and often have friends and support networks outside of higher education. The academic sphere can play a central role in facilitating students' development of friendships and interaction with professional services.

24 Dodgson, R. and Bolam, H. (2002) *Student retention, support and widening participation in the North East of England*. Universities for the North East.

25 Hills, J. (2003) *Stakeholder perceptions of the employability of non-traditional students*. London: London Metropolitan University.

The University of Wales Institute, Cardiff identified transition to HE as a recurring theme in its institutional research. Funding was made available to enable faculties and programmes to develop innovative approaches to inductions to tackle transitional difficulties. Programmes in the field of Tourism Management designed an intervention to facilitate social interaction and raise students' awareness of the basic principles of the discipline. Students participated in an 'away day', which included an open-top bus tour of Cardiff, a visit to a local tour operator, and a visit to the Millennium Stadium. The activities were relevant to a number of Level 1 modules, and this was reflected in study tasks later in the semester. The groups the students were placed in for the away day were used for group work throughout the first module. The away day integrated socialisation into academic study and facilitated the formation of friendship and study groups.

The community-based programmes delivered by the University of Wales, Newport and Swansea University are student-centred, building curriculum and support to meet the needs of individual students.

The University of Wales Trinity St David has created Y Cwad (The Quad) – a new, flexible, interactive and social learning space to encourage interaction between students and with staff. It is connected to the library and has quiet study space, but it also has space for group study and encourages social interaction through a cafe, book exchange and provision of newspapers. The space is used for a wide variety of formal and informal learning activities, provision of and access to information and resources, social activities and informal meetings between students and/or staff.

5.5 A partnership: developing students' and staff capacity to engage

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

- developing students' understanding of the value of engagement in all spheres of the institution;
- developing their skills and capacities to engage and take responsibility for a fulfilling and successful student experience;
- providing a range of opportunities at different levels throughout the institution for engagement.

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

Glyndŵr University has introduced continual assessment in programming and systems analysis subjects. This is summarised in the case study:

Students work at their own pace through a series of practical, computer lab-based, exercises. The coursework material is interspersed with assessed exercises. A minimum number of exercises must be completed in order for the student to achieve the learning outcomes and pass the module. Beyond this threshold, the additional exercises, if completed, give students the chance to demonstrate higher levels of skill and understanding; thereby achieving grades over and above the minimum pass mark.

This approach means that students are constantly receiving formative feedback on their work and progress in the module. Students are also provided with the quality criteria and guidance on how to demonstrate excellence. This continual assessment approach encourages and enables students to take responsibility for their own academic engagement, as they receive continual feedback and can monitor their progress towards their desired grade; strong students are not held up by others, and weaker students have more time to meet minimum module requirements. This approach also has advantages for staff. Students are self-directed so academic staff can use their contact time flexibly, providing individualised guidance to students. The assessment method is less time-consuming for staff too, providing time for other types of engagement with students.

Money Week at the University of Glamorgan is intended to develop the financial competence of students. Using fun and engaging activities, this intervention is expected to give students the capability to manage their money better, and encourage them to access student services and support if required.

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

The University of Glamorgan has implemented interventions to ensure that the importance of retention is communicated to broad range of staff who are involved with students, and that this is underpinned by consistent and accessible information. Meetings were held with academic staff from every division, where statistical and policy/procedural information was presented. This gave staff up-to-date information to advise students, and allowed them to compare their divisional performance with that of other divisions, identifying awards with exceptional, good or bad performance. Regular meetings between the Retention Manager and the Students' Union has led to better understanding of regulations and advice to students; for example, the posting of a one-page summary of the most important regulations on the student portal. Focusing on communication with staff and provision of information has resulted in more meaningful interaction between staff and students.

The case studies from Welsh institutions include a number of examples of other ways in which staff are enabled to facilitate student engagement and provide appropriate opportunities, including:

- making additional funding available to enable staff to develop and implement new initiatives;
- recruiting staff who have the skills and experience to engage students and teach inclusively;
- providing data and information about students to assist staff to provide appropriate opportunities for their students;
- using interactive activities to enable staff to get to know their students as individuals and use this information to inform their engagement with students.

5.6 Managing engagement: institutional responsibility

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

- provision of a range of opportunities for engagement of different types, at different levels, across the institution in different sites, throughout the student life cycle;
- developing students to recognise the importance of engagement and to have the capacity to engage in a range of opportunities;
- developing staff responsibility for and capacity to provide effective engagement opportunities;
- taking responsibility for engagement, including monitoring engagement and acting when there are indicators of lower levels of engagement;
- creating a partnership between students and institutions towards a shared outcome of successful learners and graduates.

Of particular significance here is monitoring engagement and taking action. The Open University (OU) has developed a statistical model to identify ‘at risk’ students based on a number of factors, including their previous level of education, their age and whether or not they are in receipt of financial support. At the OU in Wales, students are telephoned by an adviser outside office hours to accommodate the study patterns of the majority of part-time students who are also in employment. This phone call is proactive on the part of The Open University in Wales, and provides an opportunity for early engagement and for students to ask about issues they are unsure of.

The University of Glamorgan has recognised the importance of good data and information to improving student retention and success. They have implemented interventions to monitor the extent and quality of students’ engagement and take action where there is evidence of low levels of engagement. For example, management information for faculties has improved in both quantity and quality to enable staff to take action:

- Subject board reports provide three-year comparative data on modules within the same subject area and within the faculty as a whole. They allow academic staff to clearly identify problematic modules and review their content or assessment methods if necessary.
- Data on average UCAS points, students passing all their modules at the first attempt, students completing their degree within the expected timescale, National Student Survey scores, employability and other indicators were grouped at award level to provide award leaders with a clear overview. This dataset allowed staff to focus activity on areas of concern in a more structured and evidence-based way.

6 Practical implications for institutions

Liz Thomas and Helen May

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

- i. nurture supportive **peer relations**;
- ii. foster meaningful **interaction between staff and students**;
- iii. develop **students’ knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners;
- iv. encourage in-depth engagement by being **relevant to students’ interests and future goals**.

Together these outcomes contribute to engendering a **sense of entitlement and belonging** in HE for students. The case studies in this publication exhibit many or all of these outcomes. On the whole they also show an awareness of the most appropriate ways to deliver interventions to maximise these outcomes. The ‘What works?’ analysis suggests that to achieve these outcomes, engagement activities in all spheres should be planned and informed by the following principles:

- i. **Proactive:** activities should proactively seek to engage students, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur or the more motivated students to take up opportunities.
- ii. **Inclusive:** activities should be aimed at engaging all students; this may mean thinking about the circumstances that constrain some individuals from engaging in some activities throughout the institution.
- iii. **Flexible:** activities need to be delivered sufficiently flexibly to facilitate the participation of all students; this will include consideration of timing and time commitment, as well as location and accessibility.
- iv. **Transparent:** the ways in which students are expected or able to engage in an activity should be transparent, and the potential benefits of engaging should be explicit.

- v. **Ongoing:** activities tend to benefit from taking place over time, rather than one-off opportunities, as engagement takes time (e.g. to develop skills and build relationships).
- vi. **Timely:** activities should be available at appropriate times; for example, students' needs for engagement in the social and service activities will change over time.
- vii. **Relevant:** activities need to be relevant to students' interests and aspirations.
- viii. **Integrated:** as least some opportunities for engagement in all spheres should be integrated into core activities that students are required to do, i.e. in the academic sphere.
- ix. **Collaborative:** activities should encourage collaboration and engagement with fellow students and members of staff.
- x. **Monitored:** the extent and quality of students' engagement should be monitored, and where there is evidence of low levels of engagement follow-up action should be taken.

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

7 Case studies

7.1 Aberystwyth University – Retention matters: an holistic approach

Debra Croft

What is it?

In the strong belief that student integration, engagement and the promotion of a culture of belonging fosters commitment and achievement, Aberystwyth University (AU) has implemented a large number of cross-cutting schemes aimed at enhancing student satisfaction and success and thereby improving retention. This approach fosters strong peer relations, helps develop the student as an individual, values him/her within the institution, and helps each student to obtain the confidence and ability to access the learning, skills and support needed to succeed in HE and beyond.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

The schemes are embedded in many aspects of university life – professional services, academic and social – and include the following examples:

- I. **PRE-ENTRY:** a proactive and transparent approach to marketing and recruitment to ensure that students are confident of their choices. This includes:
 - comprehensive websites, social media and easy links for applicants to direct students to the right course choice, combined with individual, personalised attention and opportunities to contact existing students;
 - a personalised service for students attending open days and visiting days to build engagement at an early stage;
 - extensive support for widening access groups in Wales and other vulnerable groups through a number of aspirational and skills-building programmes and preparation for university life, run by the Centre for Widening Participation and Social Inclusion (CWPSI).

All potential students are encouraged to visit AU either on set open/visiting days or at other times to enable applicants to get to be familiar with the environment and institution.

2. **ENTRY:** an integrated, planned approach for this crucial first stage. There are a number of inclusive, University-wide initiatives: Welcome Week activities in Halls, run by residential support staff; activities in departments, which cut across academic, professional and social strands thereby encouraging a collaborative staff/student team; activities in the Union and a major Freshers' event spanning several days and involving all aspects of the institution. In addition, specific interventions include:
- help for mature students to meet others, with family-friendly activities;
 - support for international students – activities and mentors (run by the Union);
 - Freshers' Heroes – brightly dressed teams of student volunteers to help new arrivals to move into Halls and answer first questions;
 - targeted support for students living at home who often find it difficult to integrate;
 - reunion events for students from pre-entry widening access programmes;
 - help for students from a care background to move into Halls and have access to the basic kit that a parent might provide (first shop, crockery, cutlery, linen, etc.) and be assured of ongoing support;
 - an innovative 'Second Bite' opportunity about three to four weeks after the initial Freshers' week to allow those who were overwhelmed, late in arriving, double booked, shy and homesick to engage with clubs, societies, central services and support groups;
 - bespoke presentations in departmental induction sessions for:
 - PDP (online personal development plan owned by the student, for the student, from the start), including career planning;
 - Student Support services;
 - Signpost/Ffordd Hyn peer mentoring – a targeted flagship widening access scheme now open to all first-year students (and some second- and third-years who have particular difficulties) in which trained third-years and postgraduates can enable students to make the most of their time at university. Managed by the CWPSI team, the mentors can help with any aspect of life, act as a link to services available for students within the University, help with organising time, with motivation and sometimes just be a good listener!
3. **ONGOING:** a series of relevant interventions, which are flexible and responsive to individual needs. Interventions are inclusive – capable of assisting all students – but are mindful of some of the circumstances that might constrain groups of students and prevent them from fully engaging successfully in HE.

For example, a personal tutors' toolkit has been developed to help tutors help students help themselves. This is an institution-wide initiative, as is the training for front-line staff in supporting students (HEA accredited). However, there are also departmental schemes for specific interventions, such as those developed by the School of Art, the Psychology Department and the School of Education and Lifelong Learning. These use a basic mentoring model (with input from the Signpost/Ffordd Hyn scheme) specifically adapted for the needs of the department and curriculum.

The Signpost scheme is a major plank in the institution's support strategy. It operates throughout a student's first year (and in some circumstances may continue beyond that). The value of having an independent mentor who is not part of the student's circle of friends, flatmates, department, family, etc. has proved invaluable over the last six years, to students who need a friendly, non-judgmental outlet for a huge range of issues and a chance to sit and chat over coffee, or answer that quick query by email. Students self-refer, or could be recommended to take part by personal tutors, student support staff, residential support staff, the medical team, the Students' Union, and so on. It is supported by, but independent of, the formal academic system in that the Deans of Faculty and the Academic Office keep a supply of leaflets for students experiencing difficulties, but information divulged by students is not reported to academic departments or structures. If a mentor reports potentially serious problems, staff from CWPSI are available for one-to-one 'clinics' and will provide close monitoring and follow-up.

Evidence

For the last available complete year, 2008-09, HESA statistics show UK overall non-continuation rates are 7.2% – and for Wales 7.4% (2007-08 UK 7.4%, Wales 8.9%).

Aberystwyth University scored 5.8% (against a benchmark of 8.0%) for overall entrants, and 4.2% (against a benchmark of 13.1%) for mature students. For 2009-10, although these figures are not yet finalised and agreed, the figure appears to have decreased further and is approaching 5%.

Signpost has increased its take-up over the six years of operation. In 2009-10 the scheme worked with 158 mentees; of those, 68 were seen intensively over the whole year and 52 reported that they were thinking of withdrawal at some point (usually in the first term). As of 31 January 2011, 215 mentees have been contacted.

Aberystwyth University believes that 'retention matters' and this holistic approach has led to a number of accolades, including:

- Aberystwyth University is, for the third year running, the best university in the country for student satisfaction according to *The Times Good University Guide 2010*;
- the National Student Survey (NSS) also places Aberystwyth University as the top university in the country for student satisfaction, for the fifth year in a row.

(See: www.aber.ac.uk/en/undergrad/accolades)

SATISFIED STUDENTS lead to great retention. Here are what some of students say:

... it's just a really friendly place. I've never felt secluded from anybody or anything, everybody's really keen to get you into things.

— Luke

... I found that my Signpost mentor was incredibly helpful and friendly. I contemplated leaving at Christmas but S. helped me combat my issues with travelling and finance, as well as general planning and organisation.

— Paul

Everyone is so helpful. If I was confused I knew I could ask somebody and they'd help me out. I think everyone's very supportive especially of the international students.

— Emily

My Signpost mentor has really helped me settle in, especially on the first few weeks where I was a bit wobbly and homesick. And now I'm glad I stayed!

— Sian

The lecturers are really helpful, really friendly, there's always someone about to ask. I think it's the real community feel here.

— Leo

7.2 Cardiff School of Management, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff – Bridging the gap: an educational partnership working to make a clear progression route from school to higher education for underachieving pupils from deprived communities

Alan White

What is it?

We run a scheme that connects Level 2 undergraduates with Years 11-13 in schools and colleges. The aim is to motivate underachieving pupils who have the potential to achieve enough UCAS points through completing a BTEC Diploma in Hospitality to enrol, engage with coursework and apply to higher education.

In the Ely community, Glan Ely High School was closed as a failed school and reopened as Michaelston Community College (MCC). This changed the brand, not the community. As module leader of the 'Student Volunteering' module, I send my students into MCC weekly to organise exciting careers events and to lift the aspirations of MCC pupils. UWIC's 'Student Volunteering' module is available across the institution.

The volunteering module is offered to all undergraduates in the Department and my students aim to engage with GCSE pupils across south-east Wales by inviting them to attend industry-specific careers events where they meet and speak with entrepreneurs and experienced staff.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success in relation to the key principles and outcomes?

Student volunteers work outside term-time and beyond normal university hours and they travel out to various schools and colleges to engage with underachieving pupils. The benefits to all students are made apparent on recruitment and all volunteers are interviewed to make the mutual commitment clear in this student-led approach. My undergraduates gain incredibly valuable experience that significantly enhances their CVs as well as strengthening their confidence in leadership, teamwork and project management. Everyone wins, in that all students gain academic credit, by design, as they engage in partnership activities.

We have been running this scheme sustainably for over six years. New approaches are tested each year to strengthen relationships and confidence in the ongoing partnership with underachieving schools.

We engage with Years 11–13 at key times when they are making choices. The objective is to avoid wrong choices that can be exceedingly costly to students who change courses. We involve Careers Wales professionals, industry ambassadors, teachers, curriculum providers, HE and FE lecturers, local and international employers. HE lecturers liaise about individual UCAS applicants who are already known to them. Level 2 students inform, advise and guide pupils about HE. When MCC had set up the Level 3 BTEC Diploma with UWIC's support, the pupils asked for careers advice and we set up an annual student-led careers event to meet the need.

Evidence

Hospitality has a strong vocational element in HE and since it is run at UWIC, within three miles of Ely, it is well suited to children that often have limited geographical horizons. Aspirations are being lifted. MCC sent less than ten students to university last year. This year MCC has nine students applying to HE from the Hospitality BTEC class alone and this represents hard evidence of success. Large GCSE classes studying catering can now continue their interests. The project is evaluated on an annual basis to enhance the partnership.

In feedback about the project, students from MCC have demonstrated how it has raised aspirations and has helped them make good decisions about entering university:

It has been a good way of getting to know about university life, and everything in general ... I think every sixth form should be linked with a university in a certain way like we have. We are fortunate that we have had an extra help and advice to get us to the finish line. I am extremely grateful from all the students that have helped and advised us and also Alan because he has been there for us all, and has tried his hardest to get the best for us. It would make more people go to uni I think if the whole sixth form had the links that we have had.

I think now I know which pathways I have to go to achieve my goal. UWIC has increased our confidence to go university ... I think the careers information is very helpful it give us idea to choose the right course at university. We all are pleased that we got very supportive and helpful teachers. Our teachers also encourage us to go university and get more qualification for our future.

I think that the personal experiences the UWIC students have told us of have really helped all of us at Michaelston. The partnership can only be seen as a positive one for me ... I now realise I want to be involved in the Hotel industry. However, I am still confused if university is for me.

The Faculty Head at MCC said recently:

If you would be willing to work with us again next year (2011/2012) we would see this as invaluable in supporting both us and our students and of course hopefully being beneficial to you.

Also, I cannot thank you enough for working with our current students particularly ensuring that they have had doors (and eyes) opened for them in their university applications instigated by yourself - and not least the excellent Maths results.

7.3 Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE), Swansea University – BA Humanities part-time degree

Colin Trotman, Lynne Jenkins and Joanna Ward

What is it?

The part-time degree scheme, which was originally set up in 1990, is the Department of Adult Continuing Education's flagship programme and is delivered on the University campus and in 15 community venues in all four unitary authorities in south-west Wales. The programme, which has now produced almost 400 graduates, is targeted at students who have not had the opportunity of studying at higher educational level previously and who, because of work commitments or caring responsibilities, cannot study on a full-time basis.

In setting up the scheme, which is geared towards adult students who study on campus or in the community on a part-time basis, the Department seeks to provide a totally supportive learner-centred environment for students by working closely with tutors and community venue partners to ensure that the diverse needs of students are met. In practical terms, this means providing help with childcare, help with funding issues, support for students with disabilities, flexibility in timetabling to cater for students with caring responsibilities, impartial educational advice and guidance, a specific preparatory programme offered on campus and in community venues, and extensive study skills support. Additionally, academic tutors are selected not only on their academic expertise, but also on the basis of their experience in dealing with adult students who come from a variety of social and educational backgrounds. The pedagogical approach in the Department is one of using students' own personal experiences to bring academic subjects alive. It is by using all the support measures above that the Department is able to achieve a retention rate of 85% and to avoid the low retention rates that are endemic to other regional providers.

In addition to providing student support, as outlined above, providing study skills support for non-traditional students is also essential to guarantee a high level of retention as students are returning to study after a considerable time and may not have the necessary skills to study at degree level.

The support that is offered to part-time degree students includes:

- a 'Preparation for Study' course at the start of each academic year (approx. eight hours). This forms the basis of a brief introduction to study for adult learners, and outlines the support and resources available to part-time degree students;
- the STAR handbook (Study Tips to Achieve Results) – a study skills 'manual' offering useful advice and guidance for adult learners;
- Student Online Support (SOS) (www.swan.ac.uk/dace/sos) – a learning resource tailored to the needs of part-time degree students;
- ongoing individual and group study skills help on campus and in community locations from a small team of dedicated study skills experts.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

In particular, the following key principles illustrate how the excellent retention rate is achieved:

- DACE provides a totally supportive environment for students.
- The Department works closely with the Disability Office to ensure that students with disabilities receive all the support necessary.
- There is close contact between the Part-time Degree (PTD) team and students, with each member of the team having particular geographical responsibilities.
- PTD staff take the time to get to know the students, who spend six years being students with us.
- All prospective PTD students are interviewed and those who are not ready for the PTD are directed towards other programmes, such as Explore Learning, PTD Prepare for the BA Humanities programme, or a Foundation certificate.
- The modules offered on campus and in each of the 15 community venues are arrived at by a process of negotiation and discussion with students, tutors and community venue staff.
- Classes are offered at times to suit working people or those with caring responsibilities.
- Childcare facilities are available for students.
- Enrolment takes place in the community and on campus.
- Courses are offered online and by video-conferencing.
- Students are helped through the process of obtaining funding for their studies.

- Tutors are accustomed to dealing with adult students who come from all walks of life with a huge variety of educational backgrounds; tutors use students' own personal experiences to bring academic subjects alive.
- Students who are absent are contacted immediately, sent material they have missed, given the opportunity of a catch-up session with a tutor.
- In addition to the range of study support already highlighted library visits, educational guidance and IT courses are also offered.
- The South Wales Miners' Library is a key resource and its services have been specifically designed to suit the needs of part-time students. These include posting books to students, renewing books by telephone or online and providing book boxes for each class delivered in the community.

Evidence

Swansea University has a community-based programme of widening access that affords clear progression pathways to higher education levels. The University has seen a steady increase year-on-year, since 2007, on the percentage increase in Welsh-domiciled students from Communities First areas, rising steadily to 16.6% as a proportion of all Swansea University students in 2009. Set against this, we have a retention rate of 85% for our PTD students. Recent analysis has shown that 64% of current PTD students have progressed from earlier DACE widening access programmes or pathways.

7.4 Nursing Programme, Glyndŵr University – Written feed forward

Peggy Murphy

What is it?

This scheme for student nurses actively promoted engagement right from the start of the course by offering them an opportunity to submit one discrete element out of the four that were required for their first 2,000 word assignment before it was summatively assessed. This work was scrutinised and written feedback as ‘feed forward’ was offered with the specific purpose of giving students the opportunity to develop their own work using the comments provided. All Nursing students were invited to participate, but some declined (40 out of 62 participated). Five non-participants reported retrospectively they wished they had engaged.

This early intervention provided an opportunity for formative assessment so any students who were found needing extra support were signposted to relevant student support services. This was proactive as it enabled the support mechanisms to be put in place before any student failed. The project was scheduled to ensure that students had sufficient knowledge, yet enough time for their assessed work to be returned with enough space for them to edit their work prior to the deadline. Students were informed in a straightforward way about what the project aims were; that this was about giving ‘feed forward’ to assist them to improve their academic work. To develop an atmosphere of mutual respect the students were informed that a major part of the tutor’s role in higher education was to assist learners to develop their own personal and professional development. The project was conducted with the aim of fostering a trusting relationship between the students and the tutor as the heart of the scheme was to increase student’s ability to become successful in higher education.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

Attrition in nurse education is not new, but it is becoming increasingly problematic (Cameron et al., 2011). Urwin et al. (2010) propose that in order to maintain standards within the nursing profession a degree of attrition is inevitable; however, they also suggest educators have a moral imperative to encourage student retention. Cameron et al. (2011) support this by stating student nurse retention is both a political and professional issue, and to address this it is preferable to establish why students stay, rather than conducting an ‘autopsy’ after they leave.

This project that follows the ‘What works?’ framework and advice along with Glyndŵr University’s Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2010), which

states that: “Glyndŵr University aims to provide relevant, inclusive and intellectually stimulating programmes ... to ensure that all students reach their full potential as independent and lifelong learners”. Glyndŵr University’s widening participation strategy dovetails with the wider government drivers that aim to ensure that the recruitment of health care professionals is representative of the people they are intended to care for. In order to achieve this diversity, many higher education institutions offer nurse education places to students with non-traditional qualifications. Unfortunately there is a link between students with non-traditional qualifications and higher attrition rates (Cameron *et al.*, 2011). To reduce the personal, social and financial cost of student nurse attrition, the pre-registration admissions team at Glyndŵr University has engaged with Higher Education Academy resources and seminars to focus on how to retain students.

The project was introduced in 2009 to 62 new Level 4 pre-registration Nursing students. It was implemented following a discussion with the student group about how tutors could proactively help them to be successful on the course and what would encourage them to stay on it. To ensure the work was relevant, this was put to a vote. The majority of students asked for ‘feed forward’ on a draft to learn about the requirement for them to develop academically from Level 3 to 4. Prior to this intervention, students submitted their first Level 4 assignment and only received written feedback after their marks were finalised.

Evidence

The project was evaluated by 26 self-selecting students who participated in a simple questionnaire. Some of the quotes from the students included;

It was very useful to get an appreciation of how our work would be marked, especially as it was our first essay.

By submitting a draft the feedback helped me to go into more depth in my assignment.

Enabled me to improve the standard of the rest of the work.

I learned how to reference and it built up my confidence for the rest of the assignment.

Not all of the quotes were positive: one student's comment following 'feed forward' was:

Worry that I am doing it wrong like I did on my draft.

Of the students that participated most were in favour of the feed forward project (78%). These students reported the feedback was clear and this enabled them to achieve a higher mark than they would have received without the intervention; this was reinforced by a small focus group that met at the end of the academic year. The objective of the project was to engender in the students a sense of confidence that they could become successful HE learners. This fits in with one of the overarching outcomes of increasing retention, which is to engage students early on.

Further information

This project is included on p. 12 of Fitzgibbon, K. (2010) *First year student experience Wales: A practice guide – 2010*. York: The Higher Education Academy. Available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/nations/wales/WalesFirstYearExperience2010_English.pdf.

References

Cameron, J., Roxburg, M., Taylor, J. and Lauder, W. (2011) An integrative literature review of student retention in programmes of nursing and midwifery education: why do students stay? *Journal of Clinical Nursing*. Available from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2702.2010.03336.x/pdf> [1 February 2011].

Glyndŵr University (2010) *Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy*. Wrexham: Glyndŵr University.

Urwin, S., Stanley, R., Jones, M., Gallagher, A. and Wainwright, P. (2010) Understanding student nurse attrition: Learning from the literature. *Nurse Education Today*. 30 (2), pp. 202–207.

7.5 School of Psychology and Counselling, Swansea Metropolitan University

– ‘Heads Up!’

Paul Hutchings

What is it?

We are planning to set up an interactive module, delivered through our virtual learning environment (VLE), for students due to enrol in September 2011. The module incorporates information about the University and Department, and also contains quizzes designed and built by current students, drawing on their knowledge, which are set and administered by them. New students, yet to arrive, will be able to learn something about the subject at the level they are due to start studying it, as that subject is experienced by students, and they will be able to engage with those administering the module (staff and current students), to discuss their answers with them and to develop relationships with them. The administrators will form a ‘buddy’ group for the incoming students in September.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

This is a proactive intervention in which we are trying to engage students before they arrive. Experience tells us that when students feel that they belong here they will want to stay. We will ensure that it is inclusive and flexible by aiming it at all students and delivering it online. As an intervention, it is transparent as the ways in which students are expected to engage in an activity and the potential benefits are made clear. The module is ongoing – running from the point at which a student accepts an offer to enrolment in September. It will continue as each new student meets the administrators. The timing of the module is significant as it addresses the period of greatest anxiety for incoming students – the transition into HE when they are facing a new experience. The module integrates the social and the academic and has been designed to engage students as social beings, but also in a way that is relevant to the prospective student of a discipline, keen to test their existing knowledge and acquire new knowledge. Engagement between students is encouraged through the collaboration required as part of the intervention. By delivering the module through the VLE, staff can monitor engagement, identify problem areas and take additional action if necessary.

Evidence

We shall be piloting this activity in the run-up to enrolment in September; as yet we have no evidence of its likely success, though we have discussed the proposal with current students who have said that they’d have appreciated the opportunity when they were waiting to enrol.

7.6 Swansea Metropolitan University – Recognising helping

Nick Potter

What is it?

We want students to feel at home as soon as they arrive and, as far as is possible, before they arrive. We are inviting students to act as ‘buddies’ to applicants who have accepted an offer that we have made and to students from when they arrive at least through their first year. We are exploring the effectiveness of continuing ‘buddying’ through the student’s subsequent years.

We intend to invite students who volunteer to act as ‘buddies’ to submit for assessment an account of their experience, of their reflections on their experience and of their evaluation of their experience to achieve credit on an elective module, ‘Developing Social Responsibility’. This module will be available at Levels 4, 5 and 6 and will allow students to record and to receive credit for such activities as voluntary work, unpaid work in the community and other related activities. The module will be of utility to the University in respect of verification for completion of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) in due course and will be of value to the student as part of their personal development plan (PDP). As an elective module it will not contribute to the student’s final award, but the student will receive a certificate of credit in respect of their achievement.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

By providing applicants with buddies who are already students, peer relations between students will be nurtured proactively. This intervention will engender a sense of entitlement for both the new student and their buddy. For the buddy, receiving credit for their work as a buddy ensures that the intervention is integrated into the academic sphere as well as just operating at a social level.

Evidence

The intervention will be piloted for incoming students for September 2011: no evidence is currently available, though discussions with the Students’ Union have suggested that it will be popular with students and is likely to contribute significantly to retention.

7.7 Cardiff University, School of Engineering – Design, Make & Test

Michael Harbottle

What is it?

Three 'Design, Make & Test' (DMT) evenings are run for our first-year students in their first semester here. In each, the students work in randomly assigned groups to solve a particular problem. The tasks are relatively straightforward and involve the sort of 'fun' problems that are used to enthuse schoolchildren about studying science and engineering. They involve designing and building something from simple materials to solve a particular problem, followed by testing it in front of everyone. Tasks vary from year to year, but have included:

- Egg protector – an egg is to be dropped from a height of several metres onto a hard floor. Each team is supplied with a limited amount of newspaper and tape, and has to design a holder to protect the egg from being broken. The winners are chosen by considering the success of the design, how economical it is, and also the ingenuity and aesthetics that it displays.
- Mud bridge – each team is supplied with mud, straw and a limited amount of cement to make a mud bridge, which has to span a certain distance. This then is tested by applying a load to it. Winners are determined based on the maximum load-to-weight ratio and the aesthetics, as well as the team who comes up with the best poem about their structure!

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success in relation to the key principles and outcomes?

With large cohorts (up to 200 students), it can be difficult for students to find their niche with only lectures, laboratories and personal tutor groups in which they come into contact with each other, with the risk that some become isolated and disenchanted. The main aim of these events is not academic; the tasks can be considered engineering problems but do not require any input from the students' courses. Instead, we are trying to encourage a social bond to develop between the students, and indeed the staff, through taking part in fun, social tasks that are unlike the teaching employed elsewhere. We have found that the field courses we run go a long way to doing this, but as these are not until later in the year, these DMT events were designed to help engender this in a timely way as early as possible in the course, and as an ongoing series throughout the first semester.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with the DMTs is ensuring that the students attend. This is achieved by a combination of methods. The activities are made as inclusive as possible and they are held after lectures (5-7pm) to avoid most clashes with teaching and other social commitments, and on a day when first-years are in lectures until 5pm to ensure they are already in the lecture theatre. In addition, a small amount of credit from one coursework module is dependent on turning up to these events. Refreshments are supplied and prizes and awards are given, often by industrial sponsors who are on hand to give talks, advice and generally interact with the students, something which is not otherwise achieved until later in the course.

Although the School does not currently have a major problem with retention and engagement, there are a few students each year who do decide not to continue with their studies. The idea of the DMT events is to ensure that all students proactively engage and interact with the School viewing it positive from the start. This proactive approach helps to prevent problems in the future. It is generally well received, with good attendance.

Evidence

The DMT is recognised as being successful, by both staff and students, because it nurtures supportive peer relations, helps to foster meaningful interaction between staff and students and engenders a sense of entitlement and belonging in HE. The member of staff in charge has stated: “the students like DMT as it’s refreshing and not like a lecture, find it valuable as a gelling tool, both with each other and with staff”. Comments from students have included:

The DMT exercise was really good as well. Even though the exercises were purely engineering based the way that they were structured and performed made it a lot of fun.

Very good, ‘specially the 3 DMT exercises. Excellent.

The DMT’s were really interesting and also allowed me to get to know more of the people on my course who I might not have otherwise. They also allowed me to speak with people from companies within the engineering industry.

7.8 Centre for Community and Lifelong Learning, University of Wales, Newport – Recruitment and retention strategies with non-traditional learners

Janet Pinder

What is it?

This work is based on social action research (SAR) and development identifying recruitment and retention strategies with non-traditional learners representing a broad spectrum of widening access (WA) target groups at Level 4. This includes BME groups and Community-First-based learners across the range of equality and diversity targets.

In Newport and the surrounding area as well as in the Heads of the Valleys area, the Centre for Community and Lifelong Learning (CCLL) has acknowledged expertise in engaging with non-traditional learners working across a range of groups identified as marginalised with low skills. Many of these learners would not normally 'self-identify' to engage in learning. Initial development work has focused on working with a range of partners, including Community First (CF) local partnerships, Women's Aid, BME providers, Job Centre Plus, and MIND among others. Initial engagement is usually informal, with development workers 'sitting in' on existing sessions and gaining an understanding of the group's needs and building trust through discursive strategies rather than promoting or encouraging engagement in HE. As the relationship develops, the curriculum offer can be wide-ranging based on maintaining an informal approach with supportive teaching strategies based on identifying the needs of learners in relation to their current level of learning and willingness to engage.

Students are offered a curriculum that is wide-ranging and aimed at maintaining the informal relationship. Teaching strategies are highly supportive of the student and focus on identifying learning needs, taking into account learners' current levels of learning and willingness to engage. Learners are also brought to campus for informal visits and tours.

Following this phase, Level 4 curriculum is introduced. Learners play an active and inclusive role in teaching and learning as well as being part of the ongoing SAR with research-based teaching and learning embedded in the curriculum offered. Each individual learner's needs will have been identified and an individual plan, which will account for additional support needs, put in place. Tutors play a central role in using the learning plans to identify students who might withdraw on a 'catch them if they fall' basis.

Learning can take place in community venues and on campus, and while withdrawal rates are generally high among all providers in this sector grouping, the combination of a measured teaching approach, group learning, and tutor support that focuses on and develops individuality as well as academic progression, has shown that

withdrawal rates reduce significantly, with some groups achieving retention rates of 100% over three years. Evaluation from students strongly indicates that high retention rates are linked to the students taking part in Level 4 activities relevant to them, in their own community, and they gain immensely from tutor mentoring and support. Students achieve either 20, 10 or 5 credits dependent on their capability on entry and completion. Those achieving 20 credits, may progress to full-time or part-time degrees. Others will engage in further modular and bite-sized learning. The strong community links also provide volunteering and/or work placements in the community, and learners have gone on directly to employment with CF partnerships.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

The relationships within the group, as well as qualitative and quantitative feedback from participants, strongly indicate that the 'bonding' within the group is a core part of the success of this approach. Students feel that they can rely upon their peers for support as well as feel 'safe' to make mistakes in the group. Much of this bonding comes from commonalities within the group based on life experiences, such as poor previous education experience, problems with addictive substances, negative peer pressure (which remains a core problem) and generally similar 'real world' experience.

Interactions between staff and students in the early phases are based on tutors developing an understanding of the individuals and group dynamics and assessing the external pressures placed on individuals that may lead to a negative outcome. Staff relate to students as 'informed friends' while at the same time providing academic and pastoral support. As the relationships develop this improves retention, as the student feels more able to discuss insecurities and concerns with staff. This leads to interventions that enhance both retention and progression.

Evidence

Students complete evaluation forms at the end of each 12-week engagement period. In addition each group has a feedback session led by an external moderator also at the end of every 12-week session. This information provides a structure where students can feel able to individually speak and/or speak as a group in an impartial setting so that feedback related to their experience can be accounted for and contribute to the action cycles of the work.

Retention among the learners has been high for this sector with an average 81% retention overall. Completion is again high with 100% of those who submit achieving at Level 4.

7.9 Bangor University – Support to retain

Delyth Murphy

What is it?

Bangor University has maintained a strong commitment to the student experience for many decades and one of the six key priorities in the University's Strategic Plan is the delivery of a high quality student experience. Built on the pillars of linking research and teaching, personalised pastoral care, and variety and experimentation in learning and teaching, the University's standards have been continuously enhanced. The evidence for this is contained in successive outstanding institutional review reports from the QAA, high scoring in the National Student Satisfaction survey, and not least our reputation for sector-leading Welsh medium provision.

The task of higher education is seen to be one of optimizing the experience of a student's development rather than simply removing difficulties for him/her or helping to surmount obstacles. The nature, timing and processes of development will vary according to the experiences and opportunities of individuals and the circumstances in their lives.²⁶

Bangor University prioritises the support of all students in achieving their potential and prides itself on the positive feedback received on students' academic and pastoral experience with us. However, statistics for universities in 2004-05 highlighted Bangor University as performing below both the national and regional averages in relation to student retention. A number of strategies were therefore developed in order to endeavour to retain as many students as possible throughout their course.

As part of the monitoring of students' experience, a pilot project was introduced during Welcome Week 2006 offering dedicated study skills workshops in Welsh and English, open to all students with the aim of providing a foundation of skills on which subject expertise could be built. Experience showed that the demands on students' time during this first week meant that those interested were not able to access the workshops. Consequently, a programme of weekly drop-in advisory

26 Bamber, J. and Tett, L. (2000) Transforming the learning experiences of non-traditional students: a perspective from higher education. *Studies in Continuing Education*. 22 (1), 57–75.

sessions evolved, with dedicated tutors on hand to help with time management, note taking, essay planning and writing, presentations and examination preparation. Sessions on personal development are also offered to help students make the transition into university life. All provision was publicised widely by means of personal email, flyers, posters and announcements on PC screens in open access IT rooms across the University.

It was soon found that there was demand from both academic staff and students for support with Mathematics and Statistics and the programme therefore grew. Currently drop-in sessions in these areas are open to students for 15 hours each week.

Feedback from University Schools has reported that individual students have reconsidered leaving because of the study skills support they have received. However, this is difficult to track as it is dependent upon Schools feeding back to the Task Group within Lifelong Learning, the main provider of study skills support. The level of discussion has been inconsistent in the past, but current better communication between sections of the University may improve the situation.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

Since the introduction of the pilot project in 2006, there has been an increased awareness among members of the academic staff of the need for a strong study skills toolkit at the start of students' higher education experience. Consequently, dedicated group workshops are now provided for several Schools across the University during the crucial first weeks at Bangor and at other times during the academic year as required.

Statistical evidence has demonstrated that a large number of withdrawals occur during the break between semesters and that students were failing to reregister for semester two. Assessment, which took place at that time, was a possible cause for the number of withdrawals; as a consequence additional support was provided for students during the period January to March. Students' concerns during this period related to examination stress and the pressure of submitting work for deadlines.

In parallel and in partnership with Reaching Wider, the study skills team also co-ordinated a project in local schools in the interest of widening participation and access to university. In this project, skills were being made available particularly to school pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds with support also offered to parents.

Plans for the near future involve looking into podcasting, so that study skills advice can be downloaded on podcasts, e.g. a guide to essay writing.

Extra funding is being sought in order to further promote the support currently available. The overall aim involves the centralisation of study skills instead of the current situation where it is part of Lifelong Learning. The Task Group would like to establish a dedicated Study Skills Centre, providing a single, central location where sessions can take place.

Evidence

To encourage as many students as possible, attendance is on an anonymous basis, and detailed records are not kept. However, tutors complete a form giving details of gender, age, undergraduate/postgraduate status and academic School/college. The annual monitoring of the service has shown a gradual increase in students attending the weekly drop-in sessions, with oral feedback from students showing that this intervention is effective.

7.10 University of Wales Institute, Cardiff – Listening to the student voice: the development of innovative induction projects to promote effective transition and early engagements

Rose Lonsdale

Description/approach

Small kick-start funding is available from the Learning and Teaching Development Unit (LTDU) to assist in the restructuring/expansion of the design and content of programme induction periods. Each funded project is intended to become embedded and sustainable within the School induction process. To allow sufficient preparation time before the induction period, bids of up to £500 are invited in April each year. A key element is the involvement of the Student Retention Officer (SRO), who works in conjunction with Programme Directors to develop bids, share research findings, good practice, expertise and link staff and ideas. An additional benefit identified is that the process provided an opportunity for staff to ask for advice even if they did not think a full project was appropriate. The SRO is, therefore, able to meet and assist these programme teams as well as working with the successful bids.

This funding was made available after ‘transition issues’ was identified as a recurring thread through different types of research data. Arrival issues included ‘not settling in’, lack of opportunities to socialise/meet fellow students/tutors, the transition from school (a very personal environment) to HE, and insecurities about making friends and developing academic skills. The data drawn upon were from statutory or institutional sources, such as the National Student Survey, as well as surveys and innovative methods developed by the LTDU student experience section (who are responsible for investigating student views). These included ‘the Diary Room’, Student Withdrawal Survey (for in year withdrawals and students not returning after vacation), Staff/Student Expectations Survey and the ‘Life through a Lens’ project. The data were examined for evidence of engagement, positive experience and retention.

While School inductions welcome students and give opportunities to meet and mingle, we wanted to enable the development of fuller and more varied inductions, aimed at tackling transitional difficulties, which could be related to and embedded in study programmes. Any interventions needed to be timely and facilitate the settling in process, with clear guidance and flexibility in their operation. To gain strategic agreement for the funding, the research findings and proposal for kick-start funding were taken to the Learning and Teaching Board.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

BA and HND Tourism Management created an intervention designed to facilitate social interaction and raise students' awareness of the basic principles of Tourism and Management. The project created an 'away day', which included an open-top bus tour of Cardiff, a visit to a local tour operator, and a visit to the Millennium Stadium. The groups that students were placed in on the day were then used as a basis for group work throughout the first module and to produce a presentation focusing on questions set throughout the day. The visits enabled students to gain an insight into a number of Level 1 modules and refer back to their experiences for work set for them later in the term. This ensured integration with academic study across the first module, provided a more relaxed environment for students to meet and interact and set an atmosphere of engagement in their chosen area right from the start.

The Humanities Department wanted to create a sense of community among the five different pathways within the Department and also across the three undergraduate levels. A number of students had requested at the end of their first year the development of societies linked to the subjects they were studying. The project aimed to initiate groups and societies within induction week and also to provide an opportunity to foster engagement between new and existing students and staff. There were three events within induction week:

1. an excursion to Chapter Arts Centre, allowing students to experience Chapter, forge links for student placements, and view a film with the aim of assisting the establishment of a film society;
2. a Welsh Assembly Government debate with an invited member of the Welsh Assembly Government with the aim of setting up a debating society;
3. a poetry/theatre excursion/event, which was an in-house poetry reading with the aim of starting a cultural industry group.

The Students' Union has agreed that all societies, once established, will be supported and continued from year to year. Focus groups on the outcomes will be carried out by final-year students who will be able to practise their qualitative research method skills.

Each year there is a further review of data and information collected across the institution and the HE sector, and this has resulted in requests for projects in more specific areas. For example, bids in April 2010 were for activities to promote social cohesion among mature students, as it was found this group were often unable to participate fully in initial induction activities. Subsequently a request was sent to Programme Directors to lead the development of a society for mature students. Foundation Social Science students had been discussing setting one up, but had no idea how to begin. Working with the SRO

they had a stand at the Freshers' Fayre, undertook their first social event and developed an electronic network to meet and chat. The aim is this should not be a one-off event, but for the society to grow and be student run from year to year to support the growing number of mature students and the issues they may face.

Evidence

At the end of each induction project the project leader is asked to undertake an evaluation of their project, noting what has worked well and any problems they faced. They are asked to share ideas that could be useful to other programmes to assist in retention. A number of evaluations included focus groups or short questionnaires with staff and students. Subsequently retention rates will be studied in targeted areas to ascertain outcomes.

Feedback about the projects has been very positive and indicates that they are delivering outcomes that develop peer relations and build students' confidence and sense of belonging at UWIC, as well as fostering meaningful relationships between staff and students.

The induction programme we ran for Product Design was highly successful. The result was a dramatic increase in retention rates for our undergraduate course. [This] is the highest retention rate we have achieved for a considerable time.

— Staff member, Product Design course

These activities really help when it comes to group work on the course because we all know each other well and all interact with each other. It makes the whole course more fun and easier to stay with it.

— Student, BA Marketing Management

I think the induction outing was a great idea, especially since I'm new at UWIC so I found it easier to get to know my classmates in a different atmosphere, rather than the usual lectures.

— Year 2 Student, BA Marketing Management

Having to get stuck into a project straight away was a great way to get to know people and to boost confidence dramatically. The day was really, really enjoyable!

— Student, Foundation in Social Science

It was a great first impression of studying at UWIC and something that the other three institutions where I had previously studied, didn't provide us with.

— Student, Postgraduate CPD Framework in Education

7.11 University of Wales Trinity Saint David – Y Cwad

Sally Wilkinson

What is it?

Y Cwad (The Quad) was developed to engage proactively with students by providing an interactive and flexible learning space at the heart of the University. The University originally had two separate libraries, and the brief was to create a space out of one of the libraries that encouraged interaction between students and their peers as well as with staff, and also sought to create more quiet study spaces to anticipate the needs of all students. The aim was to develop a customer-centred space that would inspire, motivate and support the University community in an inclusive and creative manner.

Initial discussions regarding the development of a learning space started in December 2007, and the Cwad was opened to students in January 2010. In the Learning Resources Centre (LRC) annual satisfaction survey for 2007, students expressed a need for “more computers” and a need for a mix of learning spaces ranging from quiet, individual areas to social space for group work. The University also wanted to provide a staffed, supportive environment for students, based on research on the optimum conditions for active learning. Locating this student-centred space within the LRC has facilitated the development of a physical learning space pertinent to student needs, and it also compliments the online and print resources provided by the Library.

The space sits within the Learning Resources Centre, and there is a direct physical link between the Cwad and the University’s Library. The development has provided spaces that can meet and hopefully anticipate the needs of current and future students, providing internal and external wireless and networked access, static PCs and a range of laptops and MacBooks that can be borrowed either for use in the Cwad, around the University campus or off-campus. There is a Starbucks cafe operated by University staff and the Cwad also houses the University Shop and Reprographics and printed assignment submission. There are three bookable group study rooms, one seating up to 20 people, the others for six and eight people respectively with wall-mounted plasma screens. The Cwad also has a book exchange scheme focusing on social reading and engagement, and the Library has moved some of the newspapers and more generic journals to the Cwad, which has encouraged greater use of these resources. E-learning support staff are based within the Cwad, providing easy access to support for the University’s VLE. The wireless-enabled area just outside the Cwad building also presents a flexible ‘outdoor’ space for students to study and socialise.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

The project team visited other examples of social learning spaces before working with an architect to develop a flexible interactive space. Since opening, students have engaged with the space in ways that had not been anticipated. For example, students have rearranged the furniture to suit group sizes and international students have arranged fair trade events with chocolate fountains and free samples of fair trade food. The Cwad was developed to be as flexible as possible for all students and is an inclusive physical space. It is also an evolving space; for example, the original layout of furniture is constantly being changed both by students and staff to provide the optimum arrangement for interactive learning. The space has also been used as a venue for visits from A-level and GCSE students, as well as visiting librarians for a conference on developing learning spaces in public, FE and HE institutions.

Evidence

The success of the Cwad can be seen by visiting the space and hearing the buzz, as well as via the University's channels of student interaction, communication and review, e.g. annual reviews, general programme questionnaires, staff–student committees . Comments forms are also available on a day-to-day basis in the Cwad, and students regularly express positive views about the Cwad, as well as suggesting areas for improvement and change, which demonstrates their positive engagement with the space. It is an active, vibrant space full of examples of student-to-student, staff-to-student and staff-to-staff interaction at all levels across the institution. Examples include an Outdoor Education lecturer arranging to work with her wireless laptop in the Cwad for a certain period in the day, and inviting her students to meet her informally to discuss any academic issues. Staff and students regularly meet in the Cwad on a one-to-one basis to discuss academic issues. Learning Resources Centre staff use the group study rooms for one-to-one and group information literacy sessions and students book the group study rooms for personal and group use. The rooms are regularly used as a space to prepare group assignments and some students prefer to use the rooms to rehearse theatre performances or practise dance in a more relaxed environment. Some of our Health and Exercise students booked the Cwad for a whole day in 2010 to carry out a Health Awareness Day with exhibitions and demonstrations of reflexology, outdoor cooking and healthy living. This event was assessed as a group assignment project.

Students arrange to meet their peers in the Cwad, and continue to engage with the space in ways the University had not anticipated; for example, Film and Media students regularly use the Cwad for making short films for their studies, and say that it is “a brilliant place for filming in”. Other students have commented on the environment, stating that it meets a wide range of both learning and social requirements during their time at University.

The sign of a really effective learning space within a higher education establishment is that it works on all levels for both staff and students, and that all member of the University community find it a place that is conducive for their academic and social needs; the Cwad has exceeded the University’s expectations in every respect.

7.12 Glyndŵr University – Continual assessment in computing subjects

Stuart Cunningham and Richard Picking

What is it?

Rather than have milestone assessments in the middle or end of a semester, we have experimented with deploying methods of continual assessment in programming and systems analysis subjects. This means laboratory and tutorial work is assessed throughout the year, producing a final body of work at the end.

Students work at their own pace through a series of practical, computer lab-based exercises. The coursework material is interspersed with assessed exercises. A minimum number of exercises must be completed in order for the student to achieve the learning outcomes and pass the module. Beyond this threshold, the additional exercises, if completed, give students the chance to demonstrate higher levels of skill and understanding; thereby achieving grades over and above the minimum pass mark.

Students are introduced to this method at Level 4, where they undertake an introductory module in computer programming techniques. At Level 5 students study a module that teaches the principles and practices of systems analysis and development. These two modules go hand-in-hand, from both an academic and an industrial perspective; they teach how to design and implement computer software. As is the practice in industry, milestones are frequently encountered and measurable progress must be demonstrated at these points in time.

The use of this method of assessment is advantageous from a time perspective. It supports students to work through the module material at their own pace and allows the more advanced students to quickly progress, while helping weaker students meet the learning outcomes of the module. As students are working under supervised direction, the academic staff can use their contact time flexibly in each session; meaning weaker students can take advantage of consultation with staff, while stronger students need only brief contact to verify assessed exercise milestones and any additional guidance.

Students are assessed in short, sharp chunks, providing scope for marks to be recorded. However, the continual assessment element means that students are constantly receiving formative feedback on their work and progress in the module. At the point of assessment a simple 'pass' or 'fail' grade is awarded for each attempted assessed exercise. This provides a baseline, numerical mark for each student and serves as a basis for academic staff to look holistically at each student's profile when

deciding the final module mark. Quality criteria are given to the students as part of the assignment specification, providing students with guidance for demonstrating excellence, and enabling further granularity within a grading band. For example, in the case of the Level 4 computer programming module, criteria such as program logic, design structure, and transferable skills such as presentation are graded.

For the academic, student progress in the module can be quickly and easily tracked. Progress is easily assessed by examining how many exercises the student has completed at any given time in the module duration. Students too can track their progress in the module as they know in advance how many exercises there are and the minimum number of exercises they need to successfully complete to pass.

This method of assessment means the academic team don't find themselves with large portfolios and the onerous task of trawling through each one. Instead, the academic needs only to look over the mark sheet for the module and identify key exercises from within the portfolio to decide whether they wish to perform any adjustment of the overall module mark.

Finally, the modules that employ this practice encourage peer support in practical coursework. In the Level 4 programming module 'paired programming' is advocated, where students work in twos and tackle programming tasks and problems together. Similarly, at Level 5, students are able to work across the cohort, but are already assigned into groups of four or five (a software development team for a written assignment), so naturally tend to cluster together into their software development teams – just as they would in industry.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

This approach has the following advantages:

- Students are less pressured by a final deadline.
- Students can monitor their own progress towards their desired grade.
- Students get continual feedback, both formative and summative.
- Weaker students get more time to fulfil the minimum module requirements.
- Stronger students are able to accelerate their progress without being 'held up' waiting for others.
- Students are able to work with each other and benefit from peer support, without group work being a prerequisite to complete the assessment.
- Plagiarism is completely eradicated, because the academic can constantly monitor the students' work in the lab setting, and verify their learning and skills development.

In addition to the above, programming and software development are such that there is not a single correct solution to a problem. All solutions are valid, though some are better designed and/or implemented than others.

Evidence

This approach to assessment has the following benefits:

- Evidence indicates that students are more likely to achieve their potential and achieve pass grades in modules. Since continuous assessment replaced summative assignments, module results have improved and referral rates have fallen.
- Attendance rates at modules sessions have improved.
- Student feedback scores are significantly higher as students do not feel under as much stress, or feel that they are hopeless compared to peers who may have higher aptitude in these subjects or, in the case of programming, may have had significantly more prior experience in school or college.

7.13 Student Money Service, Student Services, University of Glamorgan – Money Week

Debra Thorne

What is it?

The Student Money Service provided proactive information, advice and guidance to students during the first National Student Money Week (6–10 March 2011) on the subject of financial capability and money management. 2011 is the first year this has been trialled at Glamorgan, and the intention, and long-term goal, is that engaging students in dealing with their finances and educating them about money management and financial literacy will lead to a positive change in budgeting habits and by default a more capable student body with less financial pressure during their studies.

Information stands and activities were located at all 3 of the University's campuses, in busy social spaces, to encourage as much participation as possible. The events were publicised using the University's intranet, the Student Union, Facebook, posters and plasma screens on campus.

The activities that took place during money week were 'fun' activities, from a money quiz to find out what type of money person you are, to a 'shopping basket challenge' to identify the difference in cost between branded and 'value' goods. Top money saving tips were also provided by students at the stands, with the best tip at each campus winning a prize. The Team was successful in obtaining a range of prizes from local businesses worth over £900 in total which helped greatly to incentivise activity.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

The week's events are envisaged to be the start of a series of activities to take place on the theme of financial capability and money management. The Team is looking at a future event on the subject of budgeting food expenditure, possibly with taste tests and cookery demonstrations and more prizes!

The ethos behind these activities is one of empowering students to make informed choices about money, and to think carefully about how they spend their income. Financial pressures are often a significant factor leading to withdrawal, and many of the money issues could have been addressed with an earlier intervention. It is our aim to empower students to do this themselves, reduce reliance on hardship funding and reduce withdrawal due to financial issues. It is also hoped that reducing financial stresses will impact positively on academic performance in the long term.

In addition, the activities raise awareness of the support mechanisms in place within the University so that students know where to go should they find themselves in financial difficulty, or need information, advice and guidance about money matters.

Evidence

Experience gained in advisory discussions between Student Money Advisers and students, in particular when discussing a potential withdrawal or suspension, as well as information provided by students when applying for hardship funding, has informed our view that proactively promoting financial capability and money management to our students could be a useful long-term exercise. We are aiming to work towards creating a culture of more prudent money management, and we hope that these Money Week activities will contribute towards this. In our experience there is a significant gap in the financial knowledge/capability of many higher education students, which can lead to bad money management and significant stress in their personal lives if this is not dealt with at an early stage.

The Service will be gathering feedback about the events to gain insight into the effectiveness of the activities and ideas for improvement. It is not expected that this event alone will impact significantly on students' financial capability, rather we are aiming to, over time, create a culture that at the University of Glamorgan our students are expected to think carefully about their money management, and know where to seek help if they need it.

7.14 University of Glamorgan – Who cares wins

Sherrienne Lloyd

What is it?

The University of Glamorgan has recently undertaken pan-University interventions to assist in student retention and performance. They fall under three headings: management information, regulatory changes and improved communication channels. The title 'Who cares wins' is a statement based on proven research that students who feel valued are better retained. Clearly staff care about students and retention, but the information needed to make decisions on the best advice to give students and where to focus actions to address problems was sometimes difficult to find. The interventions below were undertaken to ensure that the importance of retention was communicated to a much wider range of staff and underpinned by consistent and accessible information. All the interventions relate to the key principle of monitoring the extent and quality of students' engagement and taking action where there is evidence of low levels of engagement.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

Management information available to faculties has improved in both quantity and quality over the past few years. 2008–09 saw the introduction of subject board reports, which provide a three-year comparison of individual module statistics with modules in the same subject area and within the faculty as a whole. They allow academic staff to clearly identify problematic modules and review their content or assessment methods if necessary.

In 2009–10 existing reports on average UCAS points, students passing all their modules at the first attempt, students completing their degree within the expected timescale, National Student Survey scores, employability and other indicators were grouped at award level to provide award leaders with a clear overview. This dataset allowed staff to focus activity on areas of concern in a more structured and evidence-based way.

Most of the management information is grouped by faculty and division. In 2010–11 a visual display of information grouped by subject area and based on a traffic light system of red, amber and green was introduced. The subject groupings are the same as those in the National Student Survey and four indicators were used: the percentage of students retained during the year, the percentage of students passing all modules at the first attempt, the percentage of new entrants returning to the University

the following year and the percentage of students achieving their degree within the expected timescale. The students considered were full-time undergraduate degree students. Baselines were agreed for each indicator based on past performance and future expectation. Next the range of values for each of the bands was agreed: green to indicate subjects performing well; amber to indicate subjects where there was no immediate concern, but where early intervention may be beneficial; and red to indicate a problem area that needed to be tackled urgently. These reports will be discussed with faculties to support their action plans.

Regulatory changes have been made resulting from comparison with other universities' regulations. In some areas, such as compensation rules and late submission penalties, the University was out of line with the sector. Both were amended, in 2008–09 and 2009–10 respectively. Analysis of suspended students revealed that the majority did not return the following year. Further analysis on the reasons given for suspension resulted in a regulatory change, allowing suspension only in extenuating circumstances, being implemented in 2010–11. Furthermore, consistency in examination board decisions to discontinue students has been encouraged. Analysis of repeat-year students showed that some should have been discontinued since the decision to allow a repeat year only delayed the inevitable. It is hoped that this will ultimately improve both retention and the HESA Table 5 indicator relating to the likelihood of a student obtaining their degree.

Communicating the importance of student retention to the staff directly involved with students was the next challenge. During 2009–10, a series of meetings with academic staff from every division took place. At each meeting, statistics for all awards in the division were presented together with an update on regulatory changes, including why they had been made. This allowed staff to not only ensure that advice to students was up to date, but also compare their divisional performance with that of other divisions and highlight awards with exceptional performance, both good and bad. In addition, regular meetings between the Retention Manager and the Students' Union has led to better understanding of regulations and advice to students; for example, the posting of a one-page summary of the most important regulations on the student portal.

Analysis has been undertaken for those areas where data are available. In future, the four indicators mentioned above will be regularly reviewed. In addition to the interventions reported here, there are many examples of good practice and a range of 'softer' interventions being rolled out across the University.

Evidence

The Retention Manager held 31 divisional meetings during 2009-10 and feedback from the meetings was very positive. Two quotes are:

Everyone really appreciated your visit, that you took the time to come with the information, to explain it and the way you were able to give precise answers to questions raised.

The meeting was very informative and we appreciated you spending so much time answering questions and comments. I'll look at these with interest and I'm sure colleagues will too.

Analysis of students compensated in 2008–09 revealed that there was no difference in their 2009–10 performance compared with students who had not been compensated. Comparing the 2008–09 and 2009–10 cohorts, there was a fall of just over 3% in the percentage of new entrants returning as a result of firmer discontinue decisions. However, the other three indicators all showed an improvement: the percentage retained during the year increased by just under 1%; the percentage passing all modules at the first attempt by 2%; and the percentage completing within the timescale by 1.5%.

The outcomes of the interventions were the fostering of more meaningful interaction between staff and students and the development of students' knowledge as HE learners.

7.15 The Open University in Wales – Proactive student support

Ceri Wilcock

What is it?

The Open University has developed a statistical model to identify ‘at risk’ students based on a number of factors, including their previous level of education, their age and whether or not they are in receipt of financial support. Students who are new to the OU and considered to ‘at risk’ are given a proactive telephone call to introduce them to Learner Support Services and encourage them to think about effective ways to approach their studies on their forthcoming module. At the OU in Wales, a specialist adviser contacts students outside of normal office hours (i.e. evenings and weekends) as all our of students are approaching their studies on a part-time, distance learning basis and therefore tend to have other commitments during the day. An out-of-hours contact gives them the opportunity to discuss their motivation for study, any concerns they may have about starting the course and talk them through the virtual learning environment (VLE) system at a time that suits them. The specialist adviser prompts the students to consider their approach to study by posing questions such as:

- Have you received your computer username and password?
- Have you logged on to StudentHome (our VLE)?
- Have you received all your course materials?
- Have you any queries/concerns about what to expect from your studies with the OU?
- Do you have any specific questions about the IT aspect of your course?
- Can I just check that all the contact details we have for you are correct?
- Is there anything else I can help you with?

This contact acts as an early warning system, which allows us to identify any additional needs students may have and also ensures that students engage with the distance learning process from the outset. This kind of proactive contact also fosters a dynamic relationship with Learner Advisory Services by encouraging students to become autonomous learners who feel comfortable contacting the institution if they have any queries or if something goes wrong during their time studying with us. In addition, the proactive contact also helps students studying at a distance to feel part of the institution as studying part-time at a distance can feel quite lonely.

How does it seek to engage students and increase student retention and success?

In relation to the 'What works?' model of engagement and retention activities, we feel that this initiative is informed by the following principles:

1. It is proactive in engaging and supporting students.
2. It is delivered flexibly with students contacted out of hours and at a time that suits them.
3. It is timed to coincide with the arrival of course materials so that the questions posed seem relevant to where students are on the student journey.
4. It is monitored using a customer relationship management tool, which allows us to record every interaction with the student and extract data about how successful they were in their studies at a later date.

Evidence

Since proactive student support work was introduced in 2004, student retention has increased by 7% across The Open University as a whole.

In addition, telephone contact with students considered to be potentially 'at risk' before the start of their first course is associated with around a 5% improved likelihood of course completion, and there is a 3% improvement for email contact.

A link between a brief welcome call and course retention has also been explored by qualitative research conducted by Jeremy Leach Research in 2007. Through a series of one-to-one interviews and focus groups with students, Leach demonstrated that the proactive telephone call had emotional and practical benefits that left students feeling motivated and more confident about tackling their modules. Students reported that the phone call gave them a sense of what to expect from the OU, left them feeling valued and reassured by the institution, able to ask questions about any concerns, encouraged to undertake preparation, and as a result they felt more confident about coping with the course materials and submitting the first assignment.

8 Moving forward towards a strategy for student engagement, retention and success

Liz Thomas and Helen May

This informal review of interventions and approaches to improve student retention and success in Welsh HEIs provides a very useful set of examples that illustrate many of the tenets of the conceptual model: student engagement to improve retention and success. Some institutions have demonstrated a whole-institution or strategic approach to addressing student retention and success, while others appear to focus on specific interventions at specific points of the student life cycle, which are not necessarily joined up with other activities across the institution. To maximise the impact on student retention and success, institutions may find it helpful to move beyond the provision of a range of opportunities to enable student engagement towards a more strategic approach. In the Welsh context it is particularly important to consider how students participating in part-time and modular HE can be facilitated to form meaningful relationships with peers, academic staff and the institution. This places greater emphasis on the provision of engagement opportunities in the academic sphere, and the integration of opportunities for engagement with peers and professional services in the academic domain.

An institutional strategy for improving student retention and success could usefully include the following elements²⁷:

- **Multiple engagement opportunities:** institutions should provide multiple opportunities for students to engage across the student life cycle.
- **Interaction of engagement opportunities:** institutions should take a holistic view to ensure alignment of opportunities with the curriculum as well as across the student life cycle.
- **Build students' capacity to engage:** institutions can help students to recognise and make the most of the opportunities on offer.
- **Promote staff responsibility for student engagement:** institutions can develop staff responsibility for and capacity to provide effective engagement opportunities.

27 From Thomas, L. and May, H. (forthcoming).

- **Monitoring student engagement:** institutions should monitor student engagement and take action to promote further engagement as a result.
- **Evaluating impact:** institutions should build in measures to evaluate the impact of their engagement opportunities.

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

9 Reflective questions

Liz Thomas and Helen May

Institutions may find it helpful to review their own achievements against the model presented in this publication, particularly in relation to developing a strategic approach to student engagement, retention and success. The reflective questions below should assist with this process. In addition institutions should consider setting themselves appropriate indicators of success, and associated targets and milestones that relate to student engagement, retention and success.

- i. Do you have strong institutional commitment to student engagement, retention and success, including:
 - a. an appropriate definition of what student engagement, retention and success means in your institution;
 - b. explicit senior management leadership and commitment to student engagement, retention and success for all students;
 - c. responsibility for student engagement, retention and success delegated to faculty, department, programme and module levels (e.g. local plans, a named individual with overall responsibility)?

- ii. Do you have a student engagement, retention and success strategy that:
 - a. offers multiple opportunities for engagement at different levels;
 - b. is aligned with other institutional policies, including widening access, equality and diversity, learning and teaching, and human resources;
 - c. spans the student life cycle;
 - d. covers the whole institution (academic, social and professional service spheres);
 - e. is informed by the key principles;
 - f. aims to engender a sense of entitlement and belonging?

- iii. Do you have good and accessible institutional data allowing you to know which students/modules are experiencing poor rates of attendance, retention, achievement progression?

- iv. Do you have effective feedback mechanisms that enable and encourage staff and managers at all levels to use this information to inform practice and strategic decision making?
- v. Is there an explicit link between pre-entry work (both outreach work and recruitment) and the impact this can have on student engagement, retention and success?
- vi. Do your pre-entry, induction and first-year experience processes promote student engagement, retention and success, including:
 - a. offering opportunities for engagement with other students and formation of peer groupings;
 - b. encouraging interaction with staff and confidence to ask for help and guidance;
 - c. making the expectations of higher education and the discipline explicit to students and helping them to understand new ways of learning;
 - d. providing understanding, knowledge and skills to engage in all aspects of their higher education experience?
- vii. Have you assessed the quality of your pre-entry, induction and first-year experience processes for student groups who are experiencing lower rates of engagement, retention, achievement and progression?
- viii. Is your learning, teaching and assessment strategy aligned with your engagement, retention and success strategy, including:
 - a. student-centred learning and personalised teaching;
 - b. opportunities for development of social bonds in the academic sphere;
 - c. integration of professional services into the academic sphere to enhance access and engagement, and contribute to developing effective students and graduates;
 - d. provision of timely 'feed forward' and feedback?

- ix. Do staff understand the importance of student engagement, retention and success, and have the time, skills and resources to offer appropriate engagement opportunities?
 - a. Is responsibility for engagement, retention and success built into job descriptions and does engagement, retention and success inform the process of staff recruitment?
 - b. Are staff made accountable for student engagement, retention and success?
 - c. Are staff given time and resources to develop and deliver engaging activities?
 - d. Is staff excellence with regard to engagement, retention and success recognised and rewarded, including opportunities for promotion?

- x. Does the institution proactively engage with students who leave HE early both to collect information and to facilitate their re-entry into HE at some point?²⁸

28 For further details see Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L. and Noble, J. (2005) *From Life Crisis to Lifelong Learning. Rethinking working class 'drop out' from higher education*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

10 Further information and resources

To find out more about the ‘What works?’ programme please see our website:

www.actiononaccess.org/retention.

The ‘What works?’ programme has a **community of interest**, which receives briefings about the findings from the projects and the programme, and a JISC mail list for interested parties to share information and ideas with each other. To receive the briefings and join the JISC list please email student-retention-and-success@jiscmail.ac.uk stating you would like to join this list.

In 2010 we established a **community of engagement** to test the emerging models and tools from the programme. HEFCW provided a bursary to the HEA to enable one Welsh HEI to join the community of engagement. University of Wales Institute Cardiff expressed an interest and attending the first meeting. Further tools to assist institutions will be available as outputs of the programme. If you are interested in using or testing out the conceptual model, or further tools generated by the individual projects we would be pleased to hear from you (email inclusion@heacademy.ac.uk).

In addition, aspects of the ‘Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum’ self-evaluation framework²⁹ are likely to be useful for institutions wishing to develop a strategic approach to student engagement, retention and success.

29 The self-evaluation framework is available from: www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/inclusion/embedding_eandd_self_evaluation_framework.

The Higher Education Academy

www.heacademy.ac.uk
enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk

The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York YO10 5BR

01904 717500