Transition, retention and attainment: Strategic enhancement programme

Cardiff Metropolitan University

Case study: Having the difficult conversation: how retention is being addressed at Cardiff Met

Project title:

Having the difficult conversation: how retention is being addressed at Cardiff Met

Project leads:

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Key words:

Data, reporting, processes, enhancements, characteristics, impact, advice, holistic, institution-wide

Abstract:

This case study will outline the process undertaken by Cardiff Metropolitan University to adopt a more holistic approach to the withdrawal of students from the institution. There are many different activities being undertaken across the institution by units and Schools, which require a more joined-up approach to their actions and evaluation. This included the development of a Retention Working Group and three resultant work strands: identification of a single definition of withdrawal within the institution that allows for clear and robust data reporting, including an evaluation of the current process for withdrawal; collation and good practice and recommendations for enhancements; and the proposal of an institutional retention event.

Why was the project undertaken?

Cardiff Met has made a strategic commitment to improve the retention rates of its students, in particular under-represented groups within the University. This is accompanied by a clear strategic drive to improve students' engagement with their learning and for graduate employability. As detailed below, there are already a number of mechanisms and initiatives for retention but these are often undertaken across Schools or units in the University with no single point of co-ordination. Given a new Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (2015-2020), there is a clear driver to develop a more co-ordinated approach to retention and engagement, with consideration for a potentially restorative approach which ensures that resources are located in preventative measures to support students remaining engaged with their learning. The University Learning and Teaching Committee commissioned the establishment of the Retention Working Group in September 2015 and working with the HEA at this time is an ideal opportunity to learn from the sector in this key strategic area.

Aims of the project:

The aims of the project include:

- improved retention rates for all undergraduates;
- the development of a process for identifying at-risk students;
- provision of an holistic framework for University retention activities;
- an evaluation mechanism for existing and new retention/engagement activities;
- the production of a consistent set of data and reporting processes on withdrawals;
- clear link for on-going work on student engagement policy and the Learner Analytics Project.

How was the project implemented?

Firstly, we developed a **Retention Working Group (RWG)**, which involved academic, administrative and support staff from across the University to encourage an open and frank discussion concerning retention. Students were also invited to sit on the group and participate in discussions. The HEA attended one of our meetings and provided useful sector-wide insight into retention data and activities.

We began by **mapping** out the current situation, outlining gaps in data and identifying what sort of processes we needed to put in place to meet our aims. Part of the process involved drawing on elements of Prince II project management training, in conjunction with the University's Business Improvement Services (BIS) team. This included writing a detailed project brief, identifying stakeholders, developing a communications plan, designing a timeline to demonstrate the order of activities, and, finally, creating an engagement flow diagram to capture other areas we had not anticipated, but were linked to the work of the RWG.

In terms of **data**, we made stronger links with University Academic Registry, introduced reporting via a Qlikview system to allow access to all Programme Directors, embedded retention data analysis in the Annual Programme Review, and developed screens within Qlikview to display detailed data on characteristics of at-risk students. We also examined the Withdrawal Process, taking into account the changes made by Registry to make the process more streamlined via automatically-triggered emails. After conducting a workshop facilitated by colleagues in BIS, we realised that we needed to communicate the importance of all staff's responsibility for withdrawal. We redrafted the Withdrawal Survey, making it an integral part of the process, and to collect further data to correlate with student characteristics.

To evaluate and examine **enhancements**, we undertook a Retention Activities Survey to ascertain the scope and range of current embedded and specific retention activities and projects. We also began an Induction Review which we have started to correlate with the data we hold in Qlikview, alongside other enhancements.

What outcomes and improvements did the project achieve?

One of the main issues surrounding retention data was the lack of a common definition that could be agreed on across the University. In the RWG we decided upon and confirmed a limited number of definitions which allowed us to identify the HESA definition of withdrawals as well as those students who leave the university early in the first term. This provided more clarity for staff in terms of withdrawal and a common understanding. Once the definitions had been decided, we were able to produce timely data within a coherent reporting structure. Perhaps one of the most useful outcomes was the ability to identify at-risk student characteristics in order to create an early warning system. This will be particularly useful for monitoring Foundation students and how they progress onto full UG degrees, as well as other significant groups, such as international students. The Withdrawal Process has moved from paper-based to an online system, with automatic triggers built in to flag students' withdrawals to the necessary departments. We have clear and centralised withdrawal advice in place for students for the next academic year, including alternative routes such as part-time study or suitable transfer opportunities, and links to the appropriate support services. We have used the results of the Retention Activities Survey to begin building a bank of good practice resources for staff to encourage staff engagement with retention at course level and beyond. We have begun to forge stronger links with learner analytics, personal tutoring and the wider remit of student engagement monitoring.

Some of the **unintended results** have included the need for more comprehensive data collection in certain parts of our systems, and the inclusion of additional fields in key databases. Induction had previously been seen as a discrete element of the student experience, but we are beginning to bring this crucial part of students' successful transition under more careful scrutiny as we assess how induction impacts on early withdrawals and transition points within the student lifecycle. We are also making stronger correlations between what we view as good practice and what students identify in national surveys, such as the National Student Survey and the UK Engagement Survey, and to identify possible links between low satisfaction and high withdrawal through the use of open comments.

How will the intervention be sustained, monitored and evaluated?

For 16/17 we anticipate continued interventions from the RWG, with further links from a range of strategic departments, including student recruitment, to highlight the importance of student expectations upon arrival. Our Widening Access team will also have a much more important part to play in future work, especially with the probable onset of TEF.

We will maintain on-going reporting structures through the use of Qlikview, to various boards and committees, including Learning and Teaching Board and Academic Board. Staff will be prompted to discuss, assess and evaluate their plans for improving retention in their Annual Programme Reviews and Student Experience Improvement Plans, via Programme Directors and Deputy Deans of Learning and Teaching. There is on-going work to undertake in examining the experience of at-risk students through learner analytics and student engagement monitoring. Finally, we will need to evaluate the success of retention work on an annual basis across the university via institutional withdrawal numbers to ensure we are focusing on the right groups of students. There will be on-going opportunities to support at-risk groups through the use of student interns, especially to inculcate a sense of belonging and achievement from within.

Lessons learned: reflections on successes, obstacles and challenges

One of the most obvious - if overlooked - aspects of addressing retention is the fact that students speak to a range of people when considering withdrawing. This is not a single person's **responsibility** but everyone's, across the whole institution. Everyone who comes into contact with students who might enter in to conversations about withdrawals needs to know how to offer appropriate signposting. This requires a shift in our culture at Cardiff Met, towards working as a community to support our students. We need to help students to stay, if that is the best option, perhaps as a part-time student or on a different programme. But we also need to understand that sometimes withdrawal is the best option, and this can be done with sensitivity and positivity.
But the biggest issue of all is that we need to focus on improving the student experience as a whole, rather than fixing problems with retention. This will mean a shift in terminology from retention to supporting student success.

This project has also left us with a range of **questions**, which don't yet have clear-cut answers. From an institutional perspective, we need to ask: How do we have the difficult conversations with staff within the institution regarding student withdrawal and retention? Who is responsible for retention at an institutional level? Should we be using TEF as a driver to monitor retention more closely? Also, and perhaps most importantly, how do we highlight the importance of appropriate student recruitment and managing student expectations, pre-arrival? There are answers to this last question in initiatives such as our online pre-enrolment project, MetConnect, which enables staff to engage with future students at application stage. In terms of the Withdrawal process itself, how do we capture the students who leave without completing the process? A system such as attendance or engagement monitoring would provide flags for this, but is not currently in place. When our students do begin to consider withdrawing, are we providing them with the necessary information and guidance to make an informed decision regarding careers, programme transfer, or re-sits? How do we deal with the issue of academic failure? As for offering support, can services such as careers, counselling, and disability support, meet the demand required once we start opening up these difficult conversations? And is there a data protection risk if sharing student information for at-risk students?

Reflections on scalability and transferability:

Addressing retention is a whole-institution project that requires a change in culture and terminology, especially the manner in which we deal with students who wish to withdraw and keeping their best interests in sight. We also need to bring together all enhancement projects across the institution to ensure a more holistic approach. This is something which can be facilitated by RWG membership from all departments. It is vital that shared responsibility is communicated to every single member of staff, from academic to support. The success of a working group is transferable to most institutional initiatives which require an impact and outcome-driven approach. The success of this particular working group is due to the emphasis on frank discussions and regular meetings. While we started with monthly meetings, 16/17 could see a move to a termly format, to round up all retention activities and ensure there is an overview and scrutiny of data. The university as a whole can benefit from having difficult conversations – 'lifting the rock', as it were, to scrutinise what lies hidden.

Next steps:

We need to communicate to **ALL** staff that retention is part of their responsibility. This may need to be communicated through the use of a 'hook', such as the funds lost to the university through the fees of withdrawn students and the impact on our performance in TEF. We need to continue to build our good practice resources for staff, and draw up strategies for dealing with at-risk groups. The withdrawal process itself will need monitoring to ensure that it is working effectively. Our Widening Access students and their journey through university are a reflection on our success as an institution and need to receive effective support to succeed. Regarding the wider Student Engagement Programme, we will need to undertake appropriate personal tutoring training, do further work to interweave the work of learner analytics, and to implement a university-wide attendance or engagement monitoring policy. Finally, we will hold a retention event in 16/17 to showcase data available, disseminate our findings, highlight resources for good practice, and continue to focus on the student perspective.

Acknowledgements:

Cardiff Met's Retention Working Group
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