

National Retention Project case study Falmouth University



Supporting students to stay on at university is important to ensure their success. With 7.4% of all UK first year students dropping out of university, according to the latest figures from HESA, student retention is something that higher institutions across the country want to improve.

The HEA is currently coordinating the National Retention Project, which provides support and networking opportunities to help participating institutions to address common issues surrounding student withdrawal.

The 14 institutions from the first phase of the project took part in a retention audit to benchmark practice against the HEA Retention Framework, received bespoke feedback from expert consultants and collaborated with others at national networking events.

One institution which is taking part in the retention project is Falmouth University, a specialist creative arts institution based on Cornwall.

Professor Alan Murray, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) coordinated the University's involvement with the project. Alan was particularly interested in taking part in the project as the audit was an opportunity to benchmark their performance against other institutions in the UK and reveal good practice, as well as showing areas where they could improve.

Many areas of good practice were highlighted in the institutional evaluation by HEA staff, including studio-based teaching, personal tutoring and a mentoring scheme to connect new students with existing students.

The audit also flagged areas that could be improved, which included supporting clearing students, reducing the number of digital information platforms for students and supporting students with mental health and wellbeing issues. The way that data on students is collected and managed was also an area needing improvement, as well as providing more information on pre-entry requirements for applicants.

Alan explained how taking part in the project was very useful to both collect information and reflect on procedures and policies at the University.

“The institutional visit was very helpful,” he said. “We set up stakeholder meetings involving senior leaders, academics and students to discuss what works well and areas in which we could improve.

“We set up audits with 22 programme leaders. It was very useful to see the data from all topics and discover we are performing well against the HEA framework. It also highlighted what specific things we need to do better, including student access.”

As a result of taking part in the National Retention Project, the University has implemented a number of immediate changes, including:

- **Returner phone call.** Student mentors made phone calls to first year students to chat about their progress and wellbeing. 2,931 calls were made, of which 565 answered. As a result 89 students who were struggling were referred to student support services.
- **Module analysis report.** Better management information available, at module level, showing pass rates, deferral and non-submissions rates, numbers of assessment elements, module evaluation scores to diagnose problematic areas more readily.
- **Student information portal.** A redesigned area for staff to provide information about students and flag up potentially vulnerable students was created. Previously staff had to enter student information onto five different screens, making the process laborious. Now this can all be done in one place, with the addition of a profiler which assesses how students learn.
- **Refreshers guide booklet for returning students.** A new information guide for returning second year students has been created to help students returning to studies after the summer break.
- **Core staff training.** 93% of staff attending 3 days of training on six subjects to enhance the student experience, including retention.

- **More access to workshops.** Six weeks of a “Workshop Festival” will be held during assessment weeks where students can try out different skills outside of the curriculum.

Alan also highlighted other institutional changes which will enhance the student experience and improve student retention. These initiatives include:

- Ensuring there is adequate resource to coordinate all retention issues
- Ensure student services give students proactive support
- Supporting students with a clarity of process when modules are failed.
- Attendance monitoring and reviewing how students withdraw.
- Establishing inductions throughout the year, not just during fresher’s week.
- Introducing pre-enrolment material that includes information on what it’s like to be at university rather than just course information.
- Introducing a “I am experiencing difficulties” button on the VLE.
- Offering more support to clearing students.
- Exploring opening workshops on Wednesday afternoons with no teaching to enable students to take part in volunteering, sports and scholarly societies.
- Working with the FXU (Falmouth and Exeter Students’ Union) to deliver retention initiatives.
- Mental health staff training.

Alan concluded: “Overall taking part in the National Retention Project has been a very useful and reflective process, which has enabled us to focus on retention and work together to enhance the student experience.”

[To find out more about the National Retention Project and how the HEA can help your institution, click here.](#)

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+44 (0)1904 717500 enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk
Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR
Twitter: @HEAcademy www.heacademy.ac.uk

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