“Belonging” and “intimacy” factors in the retention of students – an investigation into the student perceptions of effective practice and how that practice can be replicated.

University of Leicester

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1 Executive Summary

The University of Leicester is a member of the 1994 group of universities engaging in high quality research and teaching. It has a high retention rate of students (95.4% remaining in higher education in 2007/8) and has repeatedly scored very high (joint highest or third) in the National Student Survey (NSS) for overall student satisfaction. Data from the NSS and previous surveys of first year undergraduates from all disciplines has indicated that a sense of ‘belonging and intimacy’ at the University plays a significant role in this. What makes this happen? How could it be better? The overall aim of this project was to answer these questions. This will enable the University to maintain and strengthen its good practice in this area and produce information for the sector in general. Several approaches have been taken, including questionnaire surveys, individual interviews and analysis of video diaries from first and second year students involved in a longitudinal student experience project being carried out by GENIE, our Centre for Excellence for Teaching and Learning. The cohorts of students included in this study have been current first and third year students from Medical, Biological Science and English courses, as well as students that had withdrawn from their courses.

Six key themes/messages emerged from the quantitative and qualitative results from all of these approaches. These themes play a major role in students establishing confidence and a sense of ‘belonging’ throughout their course.

Key themes:
- personal tutors and other staff relationships
- departmental culture and curriculum methods
- managing expectations
- central services
- social spaces
- clubs and societies

Intuitively these would be the expected key messages but our investigations have produced data giving evidence of their importance, and this is the starting point for
acting strategically in these areas in order to improve the student experience. We have produced briefings for each of the key messages, and these will provide a resource for all institutions when planning policy and strategy (Appendix 2). The questionnaires and focused interview plans also provide tools for institutions to gather their own data.

There have been some surprises, particularly relating to students living at home whilst studying. Social spaces, real and virtual are particularly important for these students and their sense of belonging was really helped by attendance at clubs and societies and also by the culture within departments. If social opportunities were provided by departments either separately or as part of the curriculum this had big impacts on this group of students. Obvious examples could be fieldwork but facilitating any group work increased opportunities for interactions with staff and other students.

We have already used this work to guide strategy within our own institution and within this report we use the theme of personal tutors as a case study to demonstrate how staff and students working together can change policy in order to enhance the student experience. The issues that we are dealing with here are central to the overall student experience and therefore we considered this partnership working as essential. Our investigations had demonstrated that students considered personal tutors as important, therefore we wanted to know whether or not students and staff felt that we had it right, if not what should be done. A research team comprising staff, students and members of the Students’ Union used questionnaires and focus group discussions to gather and analyse this information. Responses from almost 2,000 students and 300 staff were obtained. The outcome was that a code of practice was drafted for all departments to follow in operating their personal tutor programmes (previously there were only guidelines). This draft code of practice has been presented to the University’s Academic Policy Committee, agreed in principle, and after minor modification, will become University policy for 2012 (Appendix 3).
The personal tutor work is just one example of how the retention project findings are becoming embedded and sustained. There are University working groups that map onto the key themes identified by this retention project. For example:

- Personal tutor working group
- Student/Staff Committee working group
- Space working group
- Feedback and assessment working group
- Mentoring working group

In addition the Students’ Union are working with staff on a variety of projects and initiatives that also map onto our key themes that relate to ‘belonging’ and ‘intimacy’. These partnerships include:

- The personal tutor project (mapping directly onto personal tutors and relationships with other staff)
- Development and expansion of a Course Rep. Programme (mapping onto ‘Departmental culture, curriculum development and clubs and societies’)
- Employability skills in the curriculum (mapping onto curriculum development)
- Teaching Partnership Awards for Students—to encourage student engagement in developing and enhancing the student experience (mapping onto all of the key themes)

In summary we have identified key themes that help with students having a sense of belonging and intimacy. Working with students and University Committees we are reviewing practice in the areas of these themes to maintain and enhance our good student experience. We have produced resources that will help inform strategic planning of both our own institution and others and tools that will aid data collection in different situations. Collaborations between students and staff have proved particularly successful in moving towards new policies and embedding our findings. The longer term aim is to increase these partnerships in order to improve the student experience.
2 What Works? Student Retention and Success

This report is a project output as part of the What works? Student retention and success programme. This three-year evaluative programme has been initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The seven projects in the programme, involving 22 Higher Education Institutions, have been evaluating effective strategies and interventions to ensure high continuation and completion rates. The projects have been working to generate practical outputs including reports that enhance practice and associated toolkits and resources to assist other institutions to learn from their work and improve student retention and success. It is anticipated that the outputs of this programme will be particularly significant in the context of the current changes facing higher education.
3 Abstract

The University of Leicester is a member of the 1994 group of universities engaging in high quality research and teaching. It has a high retention rate of students and has repeatedly scored very high (joint highest or third) in the National Student Survey for overall student satisfaction. Data from the NSS and Previous surveys of first year undergraduates has indicated that a sense of ‘belonging and intimacy’ at the University plays a significant role in this. What makes this happen? How could it be better? The overall aim of this project is to answer these questions. This will enable the University to maintain and strengthen its good practice in this area and produce information for the sector in general. Several approaches have been taken, including questionnaire surveys of current first and third year students on Medical, Biological Science and English courses and individual interviews from all of these cohorts. In addition video diaries have also been analysed. These diaries are from students involved in a longitudinal student experience project being carried out by GENIE, our Centre for Excellence for Teaching and Learning.

Six key themes emerged from the results. These themes are important for students to establish confidence and a sense of ‘belonging’ throughout their course. These are; personal tutors and other staff relationships, departmental culture and curriculum methods, managing expectations, central services, social spaces and clubs and societies. These would be the instinctive key themes but having briefings with the evidence that demonstrates the importance of these areas provides a resource for all institutions when planning policy and strategy. We have already used this work to guide strategy within our own institution and within this report we use the theme of personal tutors as a case study to demonstrate how staff and students working together can change policy in order to enhance the student experience.
4 Evaluation topics covered by project

The primary aim of the work is an investigation of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Intimacy’ as topics which have enabled the University of Leicester to be successful in retaining students and in facilitating their success and satisfaction. Initial investigation of these phenomena, derived from feedback, points to the students ‘feeling a belonging to the institution/department’ and the importance of ‘the intimacy of the institution and its staff’. The practices that underpin these topics have not previously been clearly identified nor explored in detail from a student perspective. Therefore the evaluation topics covered by this project are those themes that emerge from a large scale investigation of what students say makes a difference. We could only guess at these at the beginning but both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that the key themes important to students are personal tutors and relationships with other staff, departmental culture and curriculum methodology, managing expectations, central services, social spaces and clubs and societies.

5 Aims and objectives of our evaluation

The project is attempting to identify what factors most influence students' sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘intimacy’ at Leicester rather than to evaluate a more specific intervention delivered at any particular stage or aimed at any particular group.

The more specific objectives of the project are:

1. Identification of practices that make a difference in terms of ‘Belonging and Intimacy’
2. Understanding of how such practices impact on different selected groups of students (potential withdrawers; actual withdrawers; low participation and ethnic minority groups).
3. Longitudinal view of the student experience from 1st to final year
4. Integrated data set related to retention and methodology for continued analysis.
5. Recommendations and models of practice for the institution and the sector
6. Design of tools to aid the identification, articulation and measurement of activities that contribute to ‘Belonging and Intimacy’ for future use across the sector
7. Dissemination activities including conferences, papers and final report
6 Background

The prime focus of the work is an investigation of "Belonging" and "intimacy" as topics which have enabled the University of Leicester (UoL) to be successful in retention and satisfaction indicators nationally. Identifying the effective practice that underpins this success is key to the subsequent replication and dissemination of that practice across the sector. Pilot studies, such as the ‘Student Experience’ video diary project being undertaken in Biological Sciences, indicate that students rapidly develop a sense of belonging, but the underpinning factors are currently unclear (Green et al., 2009; Cashmore et al., 2010).

The project had top level of commitment from senior leadership within the institution. The project management group included the Academic Registrar, Director of Student Support and Development, the Director of the GENIE Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the Academic Director of the College of Medicine, Biological Studies and Psychology. Members of the project management team were also members of the University Academic Policy Committee and the Student Experience Enhancement Group. In addition, the project builds upon the excellent relationship that exists between the University and its Students’ Union.

The current on-going changes in higher education in England following the Browne Report and the recent white paper (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011) have increased the focus on the quality of the student experience. In particular the white paper, “Students at the Heart of the System” aims to use student choice as a major driver in shaping HE provision. In order to do this, students will have greater information about universities, including data on retention and progression. Transition into higher education and the student experience during study are now critical, particularly since the onus for funding HE in England has shifted towards students (and their parents). Perceptions of “value for money” and the change in culture from “beneficiary” to “customer” will have wide ranging implications. Measures of student achievement are also being widened to include both academic and extracurricular activity on students’ degree transcripts (Burgess, 2011). Students who integrate well into the university habitus will be more likely to succeed at
both. Thus, this study, looking at factors affecting how students develop a feeling of belonging to an institution, is particularly timely.

The desire for social bonds and connections with others has a long history in psychological research. It has been referred to as the need for affection between people (Murray, 1938), the need for positive regard from others (Rogers, 1951), belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993b; Maslow, 1954), affiliation motivation (McClelland, 1987), and the need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan, 1993; Vallerand, 1997). It has also been defined in a number of ways. For example, Deci and Ryan suggested that the need for relatedness ‘encompasses a person's striving to relate to and care for others, to feel that those others are relating authentically to one's self, and to feel a satisfying and coherent involvement with the social world more generally’ (p. 243). Vallerand suggested that the need for relatedness ‘involves feeling connected (or feeling that one belongs in a social milieu)’ (p. 300). Goodenow proposed that a sense of belonging at school reflects ‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment’ (p. 80).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested that the need to belong is characterised by a need for regular contact and the perception that the interpersonal relationship has stability, affective concern, and is ongoing. In their seminal article on the importance of sense of belonging to wellbeing, they proposed the ‘belongingness hypothesis’, suggesting that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). Failure to have belongingness needs met may lead to feelings of social isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Thus, a sense of belonging can be seen as a precursor to social connectedness. In their detailed analysis of the relevant research, Baumeister and Leary argue that the need for belongingness is more than the need for social contact. It is the need for positive and pleasant social contacts within the context of desired relationships with people other than strangers. That is, the need for belongingness is satisfied by an interpersonal bond marked by “stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future” (p. 500). This relational context of interactions with other people is essential for satisfying the need to belong. They also propose that people who are well-enmeshed in social relationships should have less need to seek and form additional bonds than people who are socially deprived. As their need for belonging has been met, and is
no longer such a significant drive, they do not express or display the need for belonging as strongly as those for whom this need has not been met. Importantly, however, individuals differ in the strength of their need to belong. As Kelly (2001) points out, some people with lower need to belong may be satisfied by few contacts, while others with greater need to belong may need many such contacts. It is the lack of satisfaction with personal relationships relative to their need to belong that puts the individual at risk of loneliness.

The need for belonging can contribute to explaining a variety of human behaviour, cognitive, motivational processes, and emotions. For example, individuals explain the reasons of their behaviours in association with the need for belonging. The satisfaction of this need leads to the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and joy, whereas deficiency can cause the experience of negative emotions such as anxiety, jealousy, depression, high level of stress, and loneliness. Many negative behavioural, psychological, and social outcomes, including mental illness, criminal tendency, and social isolation are explained by lack of sense of belonging. Maslow (1968) indicated that beneath most emotional breakdowns lies a need for belongingness, being loved, and respected.

### 6.1 Sense of Belonging among Students

Proper, adequate, and timely satisfaction of the need for belongingness leads to physical, emotional, behavioural, and mental well-being (Maslow, 1968). In a set of three consecutive studies, Sheldon, Elliot, Kim and Kasser (2001) asked college students to remember the most satisfying events in their lives and to rate the needs that had been satisfied through experiencing those events. The ratings in all three studies revealed that relatedness was one of the four major psychological needs that students felt most satisfied when they experienced it. It is important to indicate here that although in some contexts the need for relatedness and the need for belongingness have been conceptualized differently, given that “the need for relatedness is the need for experiencing belongingness” (Osterman, 2000, p. 325) relatedness and belongingness were used interchangeably throughout this section. Goodenow (Goodenow, 1993b) described sense of belonging in educational environments as the following:

*Students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also*
involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (p. 25)

Many educational researchers agree that the need for belonging is one of the most important needs of all students to function well in learning environments (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000). The feeling of belonging may have a direct and powerful influence on students’ motivation (Goodenow, 1993b). For example, perceived support and the sense of belonging are expected to increase students' beliefs in their success and accordingly to increase their academic motivation. Goodenow (1993a) stated that one of the reasons that there is a poor fit between the opportunities provided by middle school environments and the developmental needs of adolescents is that middle school environments do not respond adequately to students’ need for belonging and support, which leads to a decrease in student academic motivation.

Goodenow (1992) suggested that belonging and support may be especially important for academic motivation, engagement, and performance of adolescents coming from ethnic minorities and economically less advantaged families. In a review, Becker and Luthar (2002) support Goodenow's assertion, revealing that one of the key factors affecting economically disadvantaged minority students’ academic motivation and classroom engagement in middle schools is the sense of belonging. In fact, studies consistently reveal that students who experience a sense of belonging in educational environments are more motivated, more engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school (Osterman, 2000). Moreover, existing research suggests that students who feel that they belong to learning environments report higher enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest, and more confidence in engaging in learning activities, whereas those who feel isolated report greater anxiety, boredom, frustration, and sadness during the academic engagement that directly affects academic performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Satisfying the need for belongingness in educational environments takes on a greater importance during early adolescence. Students within that developmental period start going to peers and adults outside their family for guidance (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998) and their “sense of personal ‘place’ is still largely malleable and susceptible to influence in both positive and negative directions” (Goodenow, 1993b, p. 81)(Goodenow, 1993a, p. 81). If this need is not adequately satisfied in educational environments,
students will look for other ways and people to get that satisfaction. For example, a link has been found between a lack of sense of belonging and delinquency (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Perceived sense of belonging decreases the experience of stress and school-related anxiety as well as the experience of self-consciousness, especially in early adolescent years (Boekaerts, 1993; Goodenow, 1993a; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Increased self-consciousness in adolescence may negatively affect students’ classroom engagement due to a heightened feeling of public exposure, which stimulates the experience of negative emotions, such as embarrassment and shame. On the other hand, a sense of belonging in the learning environment may balance students’ increased sense of public exposure (Goodenow, 1993a). Additionally, research supports that sense of belonging mediates the relationship between contextual variables of the learning environment (e.g. teacher-student relationships and classroom goal structures) and self-efficacy beliefs of adolescents (Roeser et al., 1996; Roeser et al., 1998). Studies also report positive associations between adolescents’ feelings of belonging and academic achievement, academic help-seeking behaviour (Newman, 1991), and avoidance of self-handicapping behaviours (Dorman & Ferguson, 2004). The sense of classroom belonging leads to the formation of sense of school community, which increases students’ positive behavioural, psychological, and social outcomes such as achievement motivation, self-esteem, self-efficacy, academic and social intrinsic motivation and competence and decreases negative outcomes such as delinquency and drug use (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

Based on an extensive review of the literature, Osterman (2000) indicates that satisfaction of the need for belonging in educational environments is significantly associated with students’ academic engagement and involvement in school and classroom activities, academic and social behaviours, motives and attitudes, expectancies, values and goals, emotional functioning, and the development of fundamental psychological processes (e.g. intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, internalization, and autonomy), and psychological outcomes like self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Supporting this argument, in a three-year longitudinal study involving 248 students, Flook, Repetti, and Ullman (2005) found that lack of peer acceptance reported in the fourth grade predicted lower self-concept and internalizing symptoms (e.g. shyness, loneliness, negative emotions such as
sadness and anxiety) in the fifth grade and, in a longer period, predicted lower academic performance in the sixth grade, when fourth grade academic performance was controlled. Path analysis on the same data revealed that almost 25% of the variance in students’ academic performance in sixth grade was explained by lack of peer acceptance in the fourth grade.

Finn (1989) suggested that perceived feelings of belonging may decrease at-risk students’ alienation from school and their decision to drop out of high school. The participation-identification paradigm, explained by Finn, emphasizes that the lack of sense of belonging leads to adolescents’ physical withdrawal from school-based activities and results in academic failure, which provokes non-identification with the school (emotional withdrawal) and alienation.

In several related studies Goodenow (1993b) examined the association between adolescents’ sense of belonging and their expectancies, values, motivation, effort, and achievement. In the first study, involving the development of The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale, Goodenow investigated the relationship between sense of school membership, expectancy of success, value, and effort for 1,366 fifth through eighth grade students from one suburban middle school and two urban junior high schools. Findings revealed that the sense of school membership was significantly associated with expectancies for school success and educational value but not statistically significantly related to academic effort or behaviour. Goodenow suggested that motivation might be mediating the relationship between the sense of school membership and academic effort and achievement. In a follow-up study, Goodenow (1993a) investigated the relation between adolescents’ sense of belonging/support, academic motivation, academic effort and achievement. Three hundred fifty-three sixth- through eighth-grade students in a suburban middle school responded to a questionnaire measuring their domain specific motivation (expectancy of success and educational value), feelings of belonging, and personal support in four domains: math, social studies, English, and science. To assess students’ academic effort and performance, English teachers were asked to rate students’ potential final grade and academic effort. Classroom belonging and support emerged as the most powerful and significant predictor of adolescents’ educational values and expectations of success. The most powerful single factor
associated with students’ effort and achievement was students’ perceptions of teachers in terms of teacher interest, support, and respect to students.

A similar age group was also the focus of Roeser and colleagues (1996) in an investigation of the relationship between the contextual factors of school environment and students’ motivational, emotional, and academic outcomes. Two hundred and ninety-six eighth-grade students participated in this study. Students’ responses to self-report questionnaire revealed that students’ perceived sense of school belonging was one of the most powerful predictors of their perceived academic self-efficacy. The sense of school belonging showed a small but significant positive relation to the academic outcomes. Students who reported a high sense of belonging in the school environment reported less self-consciousness (e.g. nervousness and embarrassment) in their task-related engagements in the class and school than those who reported less belonging to the school. The feelings of school belonging was also significantly associated with the positive school affect (e.g. good mood and happiness).

6.2 Sense of Belonging and Student Persistence

Perceived sense of belonging in academic environments has a powerful effect on students’ emotional, motivational, and academic functioning from anxiety, distress, engagement, competence to self-referent thoughts and even to dropping out. Undergraduate student persistence is a broadly studied topic within the field of higher education studies. Key in this work is the research of Tinto (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1988; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1997; Tinto, 1998). Focusing on institutional structural factors, Tinto’s theory posits that early withdrawal is impacted by a variety of factors. As students come into an institution, they do so with a variety of backgrounds, intents, and commitments. A key aspect of Tinto’s model is concerned with the interactive effects of academic and social experiences on a student’s decision to remain at an institution. Tinto’s model asserts that students who engage in formal and informal academic and social integration experiences are less likely to leave their institution. Also, individuals reformulate goals and commitments as a result of integrative experiences; positive experiences reinforce commitment. Tinto’s model is multi-faceted and considered three groups of variables.

1. ‘Pre-college characteristics’, such as, family background, skills and abilities and prior schooling experiences;
2. College experiences, such as students’ area of study, academic performance (grade point average), and the amount and quality of student-faculty interactions. These are seen as indicative of students’ level of academic integration in the college environment.

3. Students’ out-of-class experiences, such as participation in extracurricular experiences, including paid work, and student-student interactions. These represent students’ social integration in college.

Braxton et al. (2000) (building on Braxton et al. 1997) sought to elaborate Tinto’s theory of college student withdrawal. They sought to estimate the influence of such forms of active learning as class discussions, examination questions, group work, and higher-order thinking activities on social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and student departure decisions. A longitudinal study (three surveys: at orientation, in semester one and in semester two) of 718 first-time, full-time, first-year students at a highly selective, private research university indicated that active learning influenced social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and intent to return. A subsequent edited book (Braxton, 2000) focused on the first year and included a reworking of Tinto’s ‘interactionalist’ perspective. Following critiques of the theory, the contributors offered a variety of both theoretical and methodological perspectives on student departure leading to recommendations to institutional administrators. Contributions also included minority student retention, the link between college choice and student persistence, and the effect of the classroom experience on the student’s choice. Furthermore, in another text designed to further adjust Tinto’s theory, Braxton and Hirschy (2004) examined institutional commitment and integrity. They argued that institutional integrity (the congruence of the actions of managers, administrators and teachers to the mission and values of the institution) and communal potential (the student-perceived possibility of an affinity group) are important concepts. They concluded that the greater the level of institutional integrity and commitment to the welfare of the student the more likely the student will achieve social integration and hence the more likely they are to persist. Similarly the stronger the perception of the communal potential of campus life the more integrated the student is likely to become.

Tinto’s theory has faced other critiques and adjustments. Stage and Anaya (1996) were of the view that far too much theorising on retention has been inductively derived from causal
modelling that focused too heavily on traditional, white young American first-year students in private residential institutions. Tierney (1992, 2000) critiqued Tinto’s model because it misrepresented the cultural aspects of transition and, despite Tinto proposing a sociological model and being hostile to psychological interpretations, placed far too much emphasis in his approach on withdrawal as an individual matter. Yorke and Longden (2004) argued that the theorising of retention is too restricted to cope with the many influences on student persistence. Further, academic and social integration, so central to the preponderant approach, have been operationalised in diverse ways, which casts doubt on the accumulation of research findings. They claimed that retention and success are influenced by sociological and psychological considerations, augmented by economic factors.

Sense of belonging as a concept is often used interchangeably with social integration. However, Hurtado and Carter (1997) argued for sense of belonging as a measure empirically distinct from integration. Sense of belonging is a psychological factor focusing on students’ subjective feelings of connectedness or cohesion to the institution. In a longitudinal study, Hurtado and Carter explored a set of factors associated with sense of belonging, concluding that these were essential contributors to student persistence. By including a separate measure of sense of belonging, researchers are able to examine both the participation in particular activities and what that participation means to the student. Following this it can be argued that sense of belonging taps into feelings or perceptions of association or group membership (Maestas, Vaquera, & Munoz Zehr, 2007).

Since noting the importance of sense of belonging in persistence models, other researchers have investigated factors associated with sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) sense of belonging measure focused on students’ attachment to the campus community as a whole. Other researchers expand the concept to consider feelings of attachment to various communities or other university contexts (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Kember & Leung, 2004; Lee & Davis, 2000).

Principal distinctions of this concept rest with the two main campus communities, the students and the faculty. Hoffman et al. examined the main conceptual dimensions of a sense of belonging instrument that considered student-to-peer and student-to-faculty psychological connections. They found five factors related to sense of belonging: (1) empathetic faculty understanding, (2) perceived peer support, (3) perceived isolation, (4) perceived faculty support and comfort, and (5) perceived classroom comfort. Similarly,
Kember and Leung used a measure of sense of belonging that encompasses attachments to the broader university, department, teaching staff, and peers.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) pointed to the impact of the college environment on student retention, while Christie and Dinham’s (1991) study of 25 first-time, full-time, first-year students at a US university revealed that post-matriculation experiences external to the institution are important to social integration. Zea, Reisen, Beil and Kaplan (1997) showed that both academic and social integration experiences impacted on student persistence in college. In a study of 512 first-year students, Beil et al. (1999) found that academic integration and social integration predicted students’ institutional commitments, which in turn influenced their persistence in college after three years. However, the literature is not so clear on the relative weights of social and academic integration.

In Ireland, Trinity College Dublin conducted two surveys of first year students. The first, by Harrington, O’Donoghue, Gallagher and Fitzmaurice (2001) asked about students’ educational background, finances, and academic and social college life. They were also asked whether they had ever felt like dropping out of college. Students who had experienced academic difficulties, financial worries, difficulties with settling into college and concerns about career prospects were more likely to have considered withdrawing. The authors claimed the findings confirmed the importance of successful integration and the necessity for a multi-dimensional approach to student attrition. Baird (2002) undertook a second study, which examined the reasons students withdrew from the university. The most-cited reason for withdrawal was a lack of commitment to the course, combined with a host of satellite reasons. An important finding was that two-thirds of the former students reported that they were satisfied with their decision to withdraw and most students continued on in third-level education. This suggests that retention must be viewed carefully as withdrawal may sometimes be in the best interest of the student, indicating need for flexibility and support for students in transition. These studies led Trinity College to review the variety and complexity of its support services and to move towards a more co-ordinated approach (O’Connor, Richards, & Lumsden, 2010).

Need and De Jong (2001) examined the effects of local study environments on the achievements in higher education of Dutch undergraduate students. They found that the grade averages, the number of courses successfully completed, and the drop-out rates of
students were the results of individual factors, that is, differences in the ways in which
students selected their institutions and differences in the degree of success of their
academic integration into the institutions they chose. The higher education institution
attended had only slight impact on success.

A study by Wilson (1984) of adjustment to university life in Africa used a two-stage process
to identify and explore the extent of transition problems to the University of Zambia. A total
of 40 different types of problems were identified, some of which were sufficiently potent,
general or persistent, to be a cause for concern to the university authorities. The main
problems identified were academic: difficulty of obtaining books because of insufficient
copies in the library and bookshop; academic workload; poor matching of students to
compulsory courses; difficulties with techniques of learning and studying at university.
However, amongst the most serious problems was the university catering with a menu that
lacked variety and poorly-cooked food.

Bers and Smith (1991) examined student-level data from one community college in the
Midwest and found that academic and social integration played a role in determining which
students would persist in, or withdraw from, higher education. They noted that social
integration had a larger effect on persistence outcomes than did academic integration.
However, the authors noted that a student's educational objectives (for example, reasons
for attending school) and employment status (part time or full time) contributed more to
differentiating persisters from non-persisters than did academic integration and social
integration experiences.

Mackie (2001) explored undergraduate student withdrawal behaviour in the business
school of a UK post-1992 university through a comparative, qualitative study of the
experience of students who had left, and of those who had experienced similar difficulties
and doubts but chose to remain. Attention was given to the complex interplay of personal,
institutional and contextual or external factors that impacted on decisions to leave or to
stay. Both groups of students experienced difficulties of integration within the formal and
social aspects of university life, and a problematic context. However, leavers and doubters
had different levels of commitment to the university experience. Homesickness, levels of
perceived control over events and alienation were also found to play a role in the decision
to withdraw.
Roberts, Oakey, Watkin and Fox (2003) reported similar results in the preliminary outcomes of their study based on the faculty of business and informatics at a UK university. The authors noted that there was considerable literature on the reasons for non-completion of first-year higher education programmes in the UK and suggested that data gleaned largely from institutional sources suggested non-completion was variously related to: lower socioeconomic status, entry through clearing or lower entry qualifications, late starting, mature entry, subject taken (particularly mathematics-related subjects), being male, living at home, little prior work experience and poor academic performance in the early stages of the first year. They noted that there is less research on those who successfully complete the first year, despite sometimes wavering in their commitment. Using the 2001 entry cohort they examined responses from leavers, persisters who had doubts and persisters who had no doubts about continuing. The research included a survey of 466 respondents (186 doubters and 280 non-doubters), which showed no marked differences over a range of demographic variables. However, significant differences were found across the whole range of attitude questions, with doubters responding less positively per se, than nondoubters.

A marked difference in attitudes was noted across the sub set of questions relating to the student experience. Although all students responded more positively on these measures by the start of the second year, doubters responses at this stage still only corresponded with responses from non-doubters at the start of the first year. The authors note that persistence was facilitated largely by within-the-individual factors, goal orientation and its antecedent self-efficacy, and an increased ability to adapt to the new environment over the first year.

Johnston (1997) presented the results of a 1994–95 survey of institutional records at a new Scottish university after an analysis showed around a quarter of first-year students in 1993–94 either withdrew or failed. The survey suggested that non-academic problems are more likely to contribute to a student’s failure to progress than academic problems and that the range of non-academic problems was both broad and complex. In addition, staff perceptions of the degree of influence wielded by such problems was not always matched by the recorded incidence in the survey. Course leaders cited academic problems for 37% of the students. Anecdotally, financial difficulties were often cited as a reason for high
student drop out rates. Of the student records analysed, 12% had cited finance as a factor in non-progression, which while substantial, is not as high as anecdotal evidence suggested. However, it was notable that although the incidence of illness was almost equal to those with financial problems, the perception amongst course leaders of its impact as a contributory factor was considerably lower. Respondents cited personal reasons in 29% of cases of withdrawal. These were wide ranging and included general unhappiness (14%), domestic problems (10%), psychological/emotional problems (8%), inability to ‘fit in’ (8%) and immaturity (3%). A relatively small group of students (8%) had left to take-up full-time employment. In addition some students moved courses to another institution. The project has persisted and inter alia has resulted in a diagnostic text and a further study of first-year progression (Johnston, 2001).

Wintre, Bowers, Gordne and Lange (2006) showed that ‘leavers’ at a Canadian university were far from homogenous and that two-thirds of them did not leave higher education altogether but transferred or took temporary leave. Interview data demonstrated that reasons for leaving were more related to mobility, exploration and career paths, characteristics of emerging adulthood, than to negative university experiences.

In a rare comparative study, Blais and Pulido (1992) compared the effects that academic study had on various aspects of the life of adult students enrolled in first- and second-cycle programmes at a university in Canada and in Venezuela. The major differences between the two groups lie in family, social life and leisure.

It is clear from the literature and from anecdotal evidence that students who feel part of an institution are more likely to succeed than those who do not, and less likely to drop out of their studies. The University of Leicester has very good retention rates, and it is the aim of this study to analyse some of the factors which make students feel part of the University.

7 Themes / issues addressed

The University of Leicester has a high retention rate and extremely high scores in the National Student Survey for satisfaction. Initial investigation of these phenomena, derived from feedback by students given in response to questionnaires, points to the students
"feeling a belonging to the Institution/department" and the importance of "the intimacy of the Institution and its staff". Prior to this project, it had not proved possible to explore and evaluate fully the practice that fosters these traits; nor had it been possible to examine the differential impact of such practice on different groups of students. (i.e. in terms of those students who never consider withdrawal, changing course etc, those who consider it and those who actually withdraw.) A large amount of data existed within the Institution, and continues to be collected, from which top level analysis and potential causes had been identified. Here we follow up the themes quantitatively and qualitatively in order to examine fully what students have acknowledged as actually making a difference.

The University of Leicester has a long established reputation for student support and development, as evidenced by the highest average score in the National Student Survey over the lifetime of the survey; individual discipline scores in satisfaction tables; and good retention in an Institution that exceeds its widening participation targets. A wide variety of good practice is clearly established across the Institution. However, that practice consists of a complex mix of university-wide, centrally planned and delivered practice, and devolved departmental practice that together provide for a rich student experience. The project aims to crystallise the elements that “make the difference” but also to identify the most effective blend of university-wide and more localised mechanisms of academic and pastoral support.

The topic of “belonging and intimacy” addresses a key conclusion of the National Audit Office (NAO) report “Staying the course: The retention of students in HE” in identifying that “getting to really know their students… and how they feel about their …study” is a key approach to improving retention. These key inter-relationships between engagement and belonging have also been identified in other studies (e.g. Christie et al, 2004; Harrison, 2006; Tinto, 1988). This project has a focus that will explore how these may be best achieved in diverse contexts and throughout a diverse student body. The work will also extend the NAO report’s recommendation in relation to institutional review and monitoring in order to understand why vulnerable student groups largely succeed and stay at Leicester. Leicester’s student profile is more diverse than most other pre-1992 Universities, with a high proportion of distance learners, taught & research post-graduates and students from non-traditional backgrounds. The project therefore explored positive
retention strategies across a range of disciplines and with a range of students that could be classed as vulnerable.

The project is jointly owned by the Registry, central student support and academics responsible for academic and pastoral support, an approach that is holistic and enables the work to address the concerns of the Committee of Public Accounts Report “Staying the course: The retention of students on HE courses”. The project at Leicester directly supports national progress in improving retention, in a context of increasing and widening participation, tackling variation in performance across the institution by discipline, student status and profile with a strong focus on specialist, academic and pastoral support, all of which are identified as prime concerns in the Report.

Students and staff at Leicester have identified and articulated “Belonging and Intimacy” as central themes in general student satisfaction and retention. The hypothesis that the project tests is that beneath these generic topics lies a range of themes, interventions and approaches that can be identified through an integrated exploration of information held centrally and the staff and student experience. Once identified and articulated, the approach can be disseminated and replicated across the sector.

8 Institutional context
Leicester NSS data
Leicester retention data
Leicester WP data
Leicester structures:
- Personal tutors
- SSDS
- Students’ Union
9 Details of interventions, policies or practices being evaluated

The nature of this project requires that an open mind be kept as to the specific factors that most impact on students’ feelings of belonging and intimacy and consequently on their levels of satisfaction and the University’s retention rates. The hypothesis that the project has tested is that beneath the generic themes of belonging and intimacy lies a range of activities, interventions and approaches that can be identified through an integrated exploration of management information held centrally, and the student experience.

Research within the HE sector in the UK (Jones, 2008) has demonstrated that there is a range of factors associated with high retention rates including: pre-entry information, preparation and admission; induction and transition support; curriculum development; social engagement; student support; and data and monitoring. Conversely, the main reasons for non-completion include: personal reasons; lack of integration; dissatisfaction with course/institution; wrong choice of course; financial reasons; and to take up a more attractive opportunity elsewhere.

Other research (National Audit Office, 2007) indicates that four factors explain over 70% of the difference between institutions in the proportion of FT students continuing to a second year of study: recruiting more students from areas with higher rates of HE participation; admitting students with higher entry qualifications; having a smaller proportion of the intake aged 21 and over; and offering particular subjects, e.g. Education, Medicine and Dentistry, subjects allied to Medicine, and the Creative Arts. Although these factors undoubtedly influence retention, most HEIs would not wish to pursue these changes as a means of improving retention and it is more useful to focus on factors that can be addressed.

It would be surprising if the research at Leicester were to reveal hitherto unrecognised factors at work and, consequently, the research has used the NAO findings as primary areas for investigation in order to identify more specific characteristics or practices. The unique nature of the research at Leicester, however, lies in this very broad initial investigative canvas as opposed to a narrower focus on particular interventions or activities. Out of this investigation have emerged findings with implications for various
practices and structures both at Leicester and within the wider HE sector including, for example: pre-entry advice; accommodation; induction processes; departmental academic and pastoral support; course delivery methods; assessment and feedback processes; personal tutor systems; PDP; Students’ Union activities; and central support and development services.

10 Methods of evaluation

10.1 Participants
A total of 496 unpaid undergraduate students at the University of Leicester participated in the survey. The students were all full-time and belonged to the departments of English (N = 132), Biological Sciences (N = 149) and Medicine (N = 215). The 146 males and 218 females had an age range of 18 to 52 years (M = 19.98, SD = 3.57). 63 number of students were interviewed subsequent to taking part in the survey.

10.2 Design
The study was based on both quantitative and a qualitative methodology. A questionnaire design was employed to measure students’ attitudes to life at university, the degree to which they felt university life was consistent with their expectations, and their sense of belonging to the institution. Three scales were used: a 9-item scale measuring attitudes towards various aspects of student life; a 4-item scale measuring expectations, and a 3-item scale measuring sense of belonging to the department and the University. All three scales were designed specifically for a larger project of which this study was a part. Furthermore, participants were asked a set of open-ended questions regarding their feelings and perceptions about aspects of life at university. A group of volunteers from each department were interviewed in one-to-one sessions about two weeks after the survey took place.

10.3 Materials

University Life Questionnaire
Quantitative questions
The Sense of Belonging scale comprised 3 statements concerning students’ sense of belonging to their department and the university in general. Responses were measured on 7-point Likert scales ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Statements are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Items of Sense of Belonging Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I feel like a part of the university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. There is at least one lecturer (or other person) at the University I can talk to if I have a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel included in my department</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
General attitudes towards university life consisted of a set of 9 statements concerning personal factors in relation to coping with life at university (e.g. ability to cope with workload, belief in own skills, and social support). Responses were measured on 7-point Likert scales ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Statements are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Items of Attitude Scale**

1. I have the study skills necessary to complete the course
2. I have a suitable background in the subject I am studying
3. I am happy with the course timetable
4. I am able to cope with the course workload
5. I know where/who to go to for help if I am having problems with coursework
6. I do not have problems finding my way around the department and university campus
7. I feel overwhelmed by all the information I have been given
8. My family and friends are supportive of me going to university
9. The academic staff seem approachable

The Expectations scale comprised 4 statements concerning students’ feelings and opinions about their choice of university and the degree to which their expectations had been met. Responses were measured on 7-point Likert scales ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Statements are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Items of Expectations Scale**

1. I think I chose the right university for me
2. Overall, I am happy with my choice of course
3. I have thought about leaving the course / university
4. The course fits my expectations

**Qualitative questions**
In the open-ended questions participants were asked to list a) three things they particularly liked about the university, and b) three things they particularly disliked about the university. The follow-up interviews were semi-structured, with the interviewer using a set of prompts at their discretion.

Questionnaires used in this study can be found in Appendix 1

**10.4 Procedure**
The survey was conducted at the start of a lecture. In addition to the written instructions provided for each part of the questionnaire, participants were given a brief verbal explanation before starting. They were informed of their right to withdraw, asked to read the instructions carefully and to complete the questionnaire at their own pace. At the end of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to provide their contact details in order to take part in in-depth follow-up interviews.

**10.5 Data Analyses**
Data were screened for outliers, and a total of 12 responses (data points three or more standard deviations away from the mean) were removed. An alpha level of .05
was adopted. Scale data were treated as interval for the purpose of analyses of variance.

Initial analysis of the questionnaire results revealed that the department membership had significant effects on students attitudes, perceptions about whether their expectations were being met, and sense of belonging. Particular topics were chosen for further analysis which from initial analysis appeared to be important in developing a sense of belonging. These were:

- Departmental culture, curriculum and teaching approaches
- Role of central University services
- Management of student expectations
- Interactions with personal tutors and academic staff
- Social spaces
- Membership of clubs and societies

More detailed analysis of the importance of each of these topics was carried out using a combination of the quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Summaries of the findings were also prepared as briefing documents (see appendicies).

11 Findings

11.1 Departmental culture, curriculum and teaching approaches
The opportunity for students to learn through interacting with peers, rather than only with a teacher or instructor is a topic that has received much interest among researchers and practitioners. The effectiveness of small-group teaching and self-regulated learning varies with a number of factors such as type of learning material, type of task, tutor involvement, (Webb, 1989) individual abilities and backgrounds, group size and group dynamics (Webb, 1989). However, on a general level, the method has been found to promote greater academic achievement, more favourable attitudes toward learning, and increased persistence (for a meta-analysis, see Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999). Practice-based small-group learning is a method frequently used in areas such as medicine, nursing and physiotherapy, and studies have shown that this type of approach can help make tasks seem less daunting, facilitate discussion, and make topics ‘come alive’ (Overton, Kelly, McCalister, Jones, & MacVicar, 2009). Within sciences such as geology and archaeology, field trips are an important part of training and practice. This type of informal setting has been shown to have positive effects on the academic side of student life, for example on reasoning ability, but also on the learning experience and interactions of students both with each other and with teaching staff (Gerber, Cavallo, & Marek, 2001).

11.1.1 Quantitative findings
National Student Survey (NSS) 2009
The NSS data requires students to assess their institution by answering 21 questions grouped into six broad areas: Teaching and Learning; Assessment and Feedback; Academic Support; Organisation and Management; Learning Resources; and Personal Development. The University of Leicester has always fared well relative to
other institutions in the NSS and, generally speaking, results at departmental level are better than the national picture. The means for departmental total NSS scores at Leicester are shown in Figure 11.1 below.

![NSS scores for individual departments at the University of Leicester](image)

**Figure 11.1 Mean NSS scores for individual departments at the University of Leicester**

Further examination of these data was carried out to measure the predictive value of department, number of full-time undergraduate students, home/EU-overseas student ratio, and staff-student ratio (excluding distance learners) on the individual subsections of the NSS. This revealed that the only subsection score that could be predicted to a significant level was ‘Teaching on my course’ and that the key variable in this respect was the individual ‘department’.

More specific analysis was subsequently carried out into a small number of departments (Geology with the highest mean NSS score; Psychology and Engineering with the lowest; and Biological Sciences as it was to be the focus of the Student Retention and Success project). The mean NSS subsection scores for these departments are shown in Figure 11.2 below.
The characteristics of these four departments in terms of their NSS respondents was investigated and found to be largely consistent across all departments. All respondents were:

- Young (under 21 on starting their course)
- Without any registered disabilities
- UK/EU-domiciled
- Straight from school/college having studied A levels

The ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds of respondents were more varied although, in two of the departments, all the respondents were White and the socio-economic background of the majority of respondents across all four departments was from higher/lower managerial and professional occupations.

Moreover, across the Leicester NSS as a whole, response rates for different types of students varied revealing that the sample of Leicester students responding to the survey does not give an accurate reflection of the actual population. In more detail:

- The response rate for students from higher status backgrounds (Higher and Lower Managerial: 74% and 76%) was higher than for lower status (Routine Occupations: 63%)
- The response rate for white students (75%) was higher than for students from other ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Black: 66%; Asian: 69%)
- The response rate was higher for UK/EU students (73%) than for international students (64%)
- The response rate for young (under 21 when starting course) students (75%) was higher than for mature students (58%)

It is interesting to note that the under-represented groups are typically those often identified as being most at risk of leaving HE (e.g. Powdthawee and Vignoles, 2009).

An examination of the qualitative part of the NSS, where students were encouraged to add comments on their experience, indicates that students in higher scoring
departments emphasise and value ‘community feel’, small group teaching and the approachability of staff, as the following sample statements indicate:

‘Lecturers and demonstrators always enthusiastic and very friendly. They are always around and available to talk to just randomly as a friend, seriously about work, or confidentially about anything personal. Excellent teaching throughout my three years.’ (Geology student)

‘Field trips were fun and extremely educational, allowing you to learn a lot of information in a short time.’ (Geology student)

‘I have felt very at home within the university and more specifically the Geology Department for the past 4 years. Everything has been exceptional.’ (Geology student)

‘The course content has been extremely interesting; most staff are very approachable and are very enthusiastic about their topics and their own research.’ (Biological Sciences student)

‘Field courses stimulated learning a lot due to the involved practical tasks.’ (Biological Sciences student)

‘Following illness, the staff were more than happy to help with catching up missed lectures. Questions and requests are swiftly answered and staff are always happy to help if they can. Clerical staff were always helpful when it came to accessing all departmental students for social activities.’ (Biological Sciences student)

University Life Survey
As a follow-up to the tentative conclusions drawn from the departmental differences in NSS scores, differences in mean scores on the University Life Survey were measured across three different departments: two science subjects (Biological Sciences and Medicine) and one arts (English). The three departments differ greatly in terms of their course delivery methods, location, and size and it was predicted that this would have an impact on the scores on the three scales (Attitudes: nine items; Expectations: eight items; Sense of Belonging: three items) within the survey (see Table 11.1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Attitudes Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Expectations Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>5.36 (1.06)</td>
<td>5.46 (0.66)</td>
<td>6.06 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>5.55 (0.98)</td>
<td>5.48 (0.63)</td>
<td>5.73 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>5.13 (1.13)</td>
<td>5.41 (0.66)</td>
<td>5.48 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11.1: Means and standard deviations for scores on the Sense of Belonging, Attitudes and Expectations scales by department at the University of Leicester

Further analysis was carried out to assess the effects of department on the scores within the different scales.
Attitudes
Analysis of responses on the Attitudes scale reveal a significant effect of ‘department’ on the combined items of the scale with significant between-subject effects for four individual items.

1. English students gave significantly lower ratings on ‘I have the study skills necessary to complete the course’ than students from the other two departments.

2. Medical students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘I am happy with the course timetable’ than Biological Science students, who in turn gave higher ratings than English students.

3. Biological Science students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘I do not have problems finding my way around the department and university campus’ than students from the other two departments.

4. There was no difference between Biological Science and Medical students on ‘I feel overwhelmed by all the information I have been given’, and both of these gave higher ratings (i.e. more negative) than English students.

This indicates that English students seem least confident about their study skills but most comfortable with the amount of information provided whilst Medicine students seem happiest about their timetable. Biological Sciences students, however, seem most confident about finding their way around the department and the campus. These findings suggest that both Medicine and Biological Sciences may focus considerable explicit attention on the study skills required for success in their programmes, possibly with the unintended consequence of information overload reported by their students. In English, this focus is less evident resulting in their lower confidence levels but also their lesser anxiety about information provision. It is acknowledged that the course timetable in Medicine and Biological Sciences (in common with most sciences) is fuller and more prescriptive than for English (again in common with many Arts subjects). This might lead to some uncertainty amongst English students about precisely what is expected of them. It is likely that a mismatch between expectation and what students actually experience is a significant contributor to a sense of lack of belonging.

Expectations
Analysis of responses on the Expectations scale revealed a significant effect of ‘department’ on the combined items of the scale with significant between-subject effects for two individual items.

1. English students gave significantly lower ratings on ‘I think I chose the right university for me’ than both Medicine and Biological Sciences students.

2. Medical students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘The course fits my expectations’ than both Biological Science and English students.

This indicates that both Medicine and Biological Sciences students seem happier with their choice of university than English students, with Medicine students also
feeling most strongly that their course fits their expectations. Again, there is a suggestion of greater anxiety amongst English students about their course leading, perhaps naturally, to a questioning of their choice of university. It is possible that the extreme competition to get a place on a Medicine degree leads to prospective students paying more explicit attention to course requirements such that they are not surprised by any aspect of the course when they start. The contrast for many English students between their previous school/college experience, where they had little discretionary time, and their university experience, where their timetable is characterised by large blocks of private study, may result in the disjunction displayed by their responses.

Sense of Belonging
Analysis of responses on the Sense of Belonging scale revealed a significant effect of ‘department’ on the combined items of the scales with significant between-subject effects for two individual items.

1. Biological Sciences students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘There is at least one lecturer (or other person in the department) I can talk to if I have a problem’ than the other two departments.

2. Both Biological Sciences and Medicine students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘I feel included in my department’ than English students.

This indicates that Biological Sciences students feel more confident about being able to go to someone with a problem than students from the other two departments, and students from both Biological Sciences and Medicine feel more comfortable within their departments than their English counterparts. The former is interesting and there are few obvious potential reasons for this, other than that Biological Sciences has more approachable staff willing to listen to students, suggesting that further research is needed to uncover what lies behind these findings. The second finding may be the result of the greater extent to which students in those departments work closely with each other, in laboratories for example, and their fuller timetable of lectures and practicals, requiring their more frequent common assembly and a greater sense of a shared departmental experience. There are also differences on the ‘I feel like a part of the university’ item but these are not significant.

When the three items of the Sense of Belonging scale were examined separately, the only one that demonstrated a significant impact on the Sense of Belonging overall was the item ‘I feel included in my department’. Medicine students scored highly on this whereas English students’ scores were significantly lower. This suggests that ensuring that students feel a sense of integrity with their department is probably the best way to increase their overall sense of belonging but that departments might need to adopt differential approaches in order to achieve this. In this case, for example, English students have a high sense of belonging to the University but a lower one to their department, whereas for Medicine students the opposite is true, with students from Biological Sciences somewhere in between. The measures taken by the three departments will consequently and necessarily differ reflecting this disparity.
This effect is reinforced by the finding that across the three departments, students who were involved in clubs and societies were more likely to exhibit a high sense of belonging to the University. At the departmental level, however, this disguised the fact that, whilst this was true for English students, for Medicine students membership of clubs and societies was more positively correlated with feeling a belonging to the department. The context for sense of belonging varies, therefore, between disciplines; for students in some it will be located in the department, whereas for others it is more likely to be found at the University level.

11.1.2 Qualitative findings
The majority of students preferred teaching methods that gave them the opportunity to interact with their peers and academic staff although they did recognise occasions where this is not appropriate. Furthermore, a clear distinction was perceived between timetabled small group teaching sessions or seminars and times when they were required to work as a group towards a shared goal often necessitating working outside timetabled contact hours:

“They have seminar groups but it’s not group work; whereas with ours, if we don’t work as a group we won’t complete it in time so we’ve got to learn those team-building skills and that teamwork stuff before we start. I think it’s a really good way to get you introduced; you also get to meet second and third years who you can then ask for support later on if you need it... I doubt our group would have come together if we hadn’t have been put together; we’re a lot of very different characters. We’ve got a weird dynamic there... we wouldn’t have got together naturally but the forced environment works. And that’s really nice.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

Small group teaching and group work were considered particularly important for first year students:

“Seminars I quite like because they’re interactive and you get to meet people; and it changes from the first semester to the second semester so you get to meet more people than you would have met otherwise” (First year English interviewee)

“We are chucked into groups and you don’t have much choice as to who’s in your group; there’s been a lot of variation. My group get on incredibly well and I think you sort of extend that and it does become quite a social thing as well because you spend so much time with these people.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“When we joined the university and got on the course, we were split into seminar groups; and the people who were in my seminar group I kind of stuck with; you’re forced to get on, aren’t you? So that’s how I made friends... there are still people in lectures that I don’t know” (First year English interviewee)

One student in particular went further explaining how important it was for students to be given the opportunity to engage in non-assessed group work so they could get to know each other without worrying too much about the outcome:

“We did non-assessed group work at first, we put on an exhibition, which was great because we got to meet people that you wouldn’t have necessarily already talked to
on the course. We got to do a project that was really rewarding and looks really great on a CV and is a real challenge, but it wasn’t assessed so you could make new friends and take it a bit slower and not get really stressed... and then we used the same groups for our next project, which was assessed, so that really helps because you’re friends with them already.” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

Some video diary submissions from second year Biological Sciences students support the view that departments should provide initial opportunities for students to work together without marks being at stake. In one video a student describes how he does not advocate group work in the second and third year as attributing marks for a group project when individuals’ contributions varied was problematic (VD Cohort 2 - S28 2y), a sentiment echoed by another 2nd year student (VD Cohort 2 - S05 2y – 06:48). Another video diary contributor from the same cohort complained that some students seemed to dominate and take over the group work activities. Nevertheless, a first year Biological Sciences student explained how important group activities had been in helping her form friendships, having felt quite alone at the start of her course as her family and friends were abroad:

“We had to do presentations in pairs and other kinds of activities... I managed to make many friends and because we went out one or two times [it brought us] closer together. I made friends from other countries as well and that’s very good because it’s important for me to have someone here [who is not] from England because my parents are away and my friends are away so it was quite lonely at the beginning. So it really helps.” (First year Biological Sciences interviewee)

The benefits of small group teaching and seminars are not just limited to assisting first year students, but recognised throughout the course:

“I think that’s the challenge with bigger departments, how do you encourage people to make friends? When you’re in smaller seminar groups you tend to meet other people. Then by the second year you’re pretty much in seminars the whole time… So that worked quite well. And you always meet different people because you pick different options every time... I just picked the modules I wanted and made some new friends.” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

A Psychology student commented in the National Student Survey about feeling very disadvantaged as no seminar or discussion groups existed alongside some of the lectures. The student was not comfortable contacting members of academic staff with any academic issues or problems as they felt their relationships with their lecturers were not strong enough:

“There’s too much non-contact time; there should be seminars or discussion groups for lectures in the second and third year... I do not feel in contact personally with many members of staff to go to when needed as lectures are very impersonal” (NSS comment, Psychology)

By contrast, a first year medical student was keen to point out how important having tutorials alongside lectures is for students:
“I think the fact that we have group work and tutorials kind of links us to [the academic staff] so we can actually talk to them face-to-face rather than just seeing them at the front of the lecture theatre. They tend to impart their knowledge, they don’t just answer the questions and move on; they sort of talk to us about medicine and spark an interest in us about what they’re particularly interested in. And I think that helps, to see them as people” (First year Medicine interviewee)

A video diary submitted by a second year Biological Sciences student also pointed to the benefits of a small group tutorial:

“I had a physiology tutorial that was good, it was useful being in small groups and being able to work through things slowly and have someone to discuss it with.”
(Second year Biological Sciences video diary)

Whilst the importance of effective small group teaching and activities is one of the key messages to come out of the qualitative data, it is clear that such opportunities will vary from course to course. Biological Sciences and Medical students have far more timetabled contact hours than the English students for example; the benefits of extended laboratory sessions in enabling students to develop good relationships with their supervisors and peers were mentioned by several third year Biological Sciences students in their video diaries (see 02:55 VD Cohort 1 - S08 3y) and (00:07 VD Cohort 1 - S09 3y)

Some students also discussed the importance of timetabled, but informal, help sessions; sessions they were encouraged to attend to discuss any academic problems or issues that were concerning them:

“You can ask questions during [and after] lectures... but then when I went to the help sessions I found that it’s easier to go there because the time is not very limited, so you can go there and ask them anything you want; because it’s face-to-face it’s easier and they explain things like diagrams or something else that maybe they don’t [explain] in the lecture.” (First year Biological Sciences interviewee)

“On a couple of modules they’ve put in 2-hour help sessions twice a week and they’re really useful if I have anything that I just want to go to talk to a lecturer on a one-on-one basis about” (First year Biological Sciences interviewee)

“We have small group work sessions where you can talk in small groups and go up to the tutor and just ask things; they are there to help you” (First year Medicine interviewee)

Field trips were also viewed as providing excellent opportunities for students to develop friendships not only with their peers, but also with the academic staff accompanying them. Students were subsequently more comfortable approaching academic staff in more formal University settings:

“Field trips away with course mates increased friendships and helped in forming support groups for work” (Third year Biological Sciences questionnaire respondent)
A second year video diary contributor explained how a microbiology field trip had felt really informal and had been a great way to get to know the lecturers on a more equal basis. (see VD Cohort 1 - S03 2y. 00:28) Another second year video diary contributor explained how they hadn’t had the opportunity to go on a field trip but felt that they would have liked to have done (see VD Cohort 2 - S15 2y, 01:53)

**Student-led informal learning**

There are many examples of students learning ‘informally’ with each other’s help beyond the timetabled contact hours and group work. One interviewee explained how some PhD students meet informally to discuss their research. Several other students also explained how they meet to help each other out at certain times:

“I made quite a lot of friends just on my course because it’s been really sociable. We’ve all had coursework to do together so we all go round and help each other; like, people come to me with questions and I’ll help them out, and the same the other way. And it’s great just working together and sharing ideas.” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

“We all go up to the third floor; and some days before assignments, everyone is up there just working and saying ‘Can you help me with this?” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

“It’s quite supportive in a way because you’re all up to the same thing – especially at Christmas with revision: we’d be in the library most days for 8-10 hours so it was nice to have a little social network you could pop down for a cup of tea with.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

These informal meetings and help sessions appear to be natural extensions to the relationships formed through course methods and other social activities.

**Additional systems for encouraging peer interaction**

In addition to the curriculum methods outlined above, there were systems in place to encourage students to help each other through mentoring and PAL (Peer-Assisted Learning) schemes:

“We have these ‘medic families’. So during Intro Week you get assigned a ‘parent’ – they’re generally second years – introduce you to academic staff and talk you through things, and if you’re stuck on a particular area they’ll just help you out with it” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“I was a bit worried before I started my seminars because I hadn’t been given a timetable and it was about a week before I was due to start, so I was a bit worried about that. But do you know the Pal Scheme? They have second and third year students helping first years: I had an email from the girl I met through that, so I emailed her and asked the question and she said it was fine and I’d get it the next week. So that was helpful” (First year English interviewee)

“On my course we had a mentoring scheme…And we just met up for coffee a few times at the beginning. Also, the first presentation I was doing I was really struggling
because I hadn’t done a presentation before in that kind of context – using PowerPoint and film and things I hadn’t used before – so I emailed her about it and she sent me an example where she’d got a first so I could follow it… I found that really helped me as well, just to feel more at ease… She’s my Facebook friend now and I email her: when I was looking for jobs, I’d email her about any interview questions from when she did them and she sent me some interview questions… we decided that we were going to remain professional buddies… I wouldn’t say she’s one of my ‘friends’ now; I’d say it’s more of a ‘working relationship’ if you know what I mean?” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

Another Medicine student gave an example of tutors actually putting students in touch with each other to help with specific problems or concerns:

“So the first week out the molecules module in semester one, I straight away identified that as a problem area for me so I just thought don’t beat around the bush and get behind; so I got straight in touch with them and literally the next day they’d given me the email of another medic to go and talk to. And I’d met up with her within the week and it’s been fantastic, really; magic help… occasionally you’ll come across something where I’ll need a bit of help and I’ll just meet up with her, just for a few hours on an evening or on a weekend – whenever she’s got time, really – and she’ll just go over it with me from her notes in the past etc. But it’s kind of something that stays with you then until you just don’t need it any more I suppose… I really don’t know what I would have done without that because it really was quite difficult for myself and a number of others; but personally that really works for me – as I think it does for a lot of people.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

Electronic information delivery and communication
The potential of online resources was recognised by the students, not only as a way of enhancing their learning experience but also as an effective way of communicating with their peers and tutors:

“Blackboard! That’s what surprised me: a lot of people have said their schools had an online learning environment – we didn’t. My school still runs on Windows ‘95… And so Blackboard to me, I was like ‘Wow!’ I was like ‘I can get my lectures online?’ I mean, one of our lecturers this term actually records his lectures and podcasts them. We’ve got very strict rules: we’re not allowed to send them off or distribute them because that’s breach of our contracts with the Med School. But as a learning resource for us, we can download that and we can watch the slides at the same time; so when it comes to revision, we’ve got so many different resources to pull on.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“I like that they upload lecture slides to Blackboard; and I like that they use Blackboard to make announcements and a lot of it is centralised so you can find lecture handouts and seminar preparation that you have to do, and seminar handouts and things like that all on there.” (First year English interviewee)

“The resources are there, everything’s set out for you and everything’s given to you: online resources like Blackboard and GENIE and stuff” (First year Biological Sciences interviewee)
It was clear, however, that the students saw the benefits offered as being very dependent on the ability of lecturers to use the resources effectively. A third year English student explained that some lecturers purposefully delayed making slides available on Blackboard until after the lecture itself lest students failed to pay attention to the actual lecture:

“I think some lecturers think that if they put things up there then we won’t pay proper attention or something, because not everyone puts things on Blackboard. Like with lecture slides, they’re like ‘We’re not going to put them up there because you’ll turn up and you’ll think you’ve got all your lecture slides already and you won’t take notes’. And I kind of want them to trust us and so if I’ve got those lecture notes, I’m not wasting time writing down something that’s already written for me…”

I always talk about this with my friends because there are certain lecturers who don’t put things up and we get really annoyed at it because it’s like ‘Now I’ve spent the whole lesson trying to copy your notes and get things down’ – because we have to piece it together like I’ve got the name, they’ve got the date, I’ve got the theory. But what does this all mean?!” (Third year English interviewee)

Moreover, some students appeared to be avoiding the lectures delivered by certain staff whose lectures added little to their Powerpoint presentation, preferring simply to download the presentation from Blackboard instead:

“Some lecturers will basically have their Powerpoint presentation up there and they’ll pretty much read what’s on it, so was there any point in turning up to the lecture because I can just read it on Blackboard afterwards? So that’s why a lot of students have stopped turning up for lectures because they think ‘Well, I’ll just get the information off Blackboard’ because the lecturers don’t develop it.” (First year English interviewee)

Clearly, academic staff need to take care in how they use Blackboard and other online learning resources in order not to discourage attendance and thereby limit the possibilities of interaction even further. There were, however, some excellent examples of effective use of online resources involving the use of discussion boards to enable virtual discussions to take place between students. This seemed to be most effective when students were left to discuss topics with the tutor only contributing when necessary:

“There’s an online discussion board on medicine and we talk about questions and answers to stuff if people aren’t sure; and if nobody’s really getting the right idea, the module leader will step in and say ‘Look, here’s an explanation’. They’ll give time to let other people talk about it first but if no one’s getting the right idea, they’ll step in and clarify on the online discussion boards.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“I used to look on that from time to time and someone would have posted a question; and they would give students a couple of chances to answer it but then in the end they were really good at replying themselves [by posting] quite detailed and good answers.” (First year Medicine interviewee)
“The lecturer opened up a blackboard discussion group which proved very successful and extremely helpful. Even more helpful than the ‘help desk’ (where I have only been once)” (NSS comment, Psychology Student)

One second year Biological Sciences student offered up a few words of caution in a video diary about this mode of interaction after taking part in an online discussion. Although recognising the advantages of having a discussion without the participants actually having to be in the same physical location, the student felt that the conversations often moved too fast and some students tended to contribute more than others:

“They had a discussion board online, which was good and bad. It was good as could be anywhere, but it was bad because as they were being marked on it quite a few people tried to dominate it. It was very quick paced too so often people had moved onto the next topic before they had chance to answer a question on the first one.” (Second year Biological Sciences video diary)

Many students also commented on how useful it was to be able to communicate with their tutors via email but only if they thought they could get a relatively quick response to their queries. The students learned quickly which of their tutors were likely to respond promptly:

“They always say ‘If you have a problem, have a go at doing it yourself but if all else fails you can email me and I’ll get back to you’.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“You know they’re obviously very dedicated because you look at some of the times they were posting them, like midnight, 1am…” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“There are a couple of guys whose personal tutors aren’t that quick at responding and stuff and they’ve said it’s been a bit of a pain”. (First year English interview)

Course led social interactions and activities
Relationships fostered in the classroom through teaching methods often lead to students socialising away from the classroom but the research has shown that social events organised by departments are very popular with students. Whilst the research provided very few examples of such events taking place, students universally agreed that they would like to see more. One student, from the MA in Museum Studies, explained how a social event had been arranged at the start of the course and thought it would be very beneficial to have a similar event organised for other courses at the University:

“They had a little social gathering after the first day so we all got to meet each other and the lecturers in a less formal setting, which was really nice. I think it’s a format that works. It was great as there were 70 of us on the course so it was still quite a big course but I think that it really helped and everyone could be themselves. It was just relaxed and a good environment” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

Such departmental social events prompted enthusiasm; a third year English student spoke very highly of a professor from the department who agreed to attend a social gathering in the Students’ Union bar as part of the ‘Literary Leicester’ week:
“There was a Literary Leicester thing a couple of weeks ago and [the professor] gave a talk. The English Society all got together in the Scholar and asked [him] to come and have a drink with us. He came along after his talk to talk to us about what his opinions were on various things, and we could ask him questions. That was really nice because it was good for tutors to treat students as colleagues and not just as though it’s a superior/inferior relationship. We’re not little kids anymore and I feel that’s really good” (Third year English interviewee)

The advantages of having course specific clubs and societies (e.g. the English Society) were cited by the students as being another way of developing friendships with their peers and breaking down barriers with academic staff although the opportunities offered by these societies were not always fully exploited or fully thought through:

“There’s the English Society, which quite a lot of people joined. I didn’t join because I couldn’t see the benefits for me; they just seemed to do a pub crawl every now and again and that was it. And I don’t think many of the people who have joined have done anything with the English Society in the end because it was like ‘Oh, another bar crawl…” Really, is that all you could come up with?” (First year English interviewee)

“The only thing the English department organised was a trip to see King Lear this year, which a lot of people couldn’t do. The timing of it was when we had loads of essays due; we had one due the following day so it was ‘No, it’s just not possible!’” (First year English interviewee)

11.1.3 Implications

The department to which a student belongs is a huge influence on the attitudes and expectations of its students and, crucially, on their overall sense of belonging. This suggests that many of the interventions designed to enhance the experience of students at the University, and by implication to increase their sense of belonging, need to be rooted at this level in order to have the greatest impact. It is important here to discriminate between different types of intervention. For example, the qualitative data clearly demonstrates the importance of curriculum methods, not only for effective learning, but also in helping students develop relationships with their fellow students and the academic staff at the University. In particular, first year students valued the opportunities presented by small group teaching, particularly within seminar group discussions, tutorials or during laboratory work, and welcomed attempts by academic staff to engage them on an individual level. Moreover, there is some evidence that relationships fostered by group teaching activities within the curriculum can lead to more informal group work or seminar discussions between students on academic issues and course work.

Other interventions, for example field trips, whilst having an evident academic benefit, were also regarded as valuable opportunities to develop friendships with other students and, crucially, get to know academic staff on a more equal basis. These fit more closely with those social events and activities organised by departments with the explicit aim of helping students to integrate and belong. For those students not staying in University accommodation, such activities are particularly important,
especially where curricular opportunities for socialising are more limited due to fewer contact hours. A third type of intervention, the more formal structures designed to support students directly, such as timetabled help sessions, mentoring and peer-assisted learning schemes, and online discussion groups, were also seen as beneficial in terms of providing help, cementing relationships and aiding communication. Colleges, therefore, might consider mapping the cultures and practices across their constituent departments in order to identify more clearly those practices which most foster their students’ sense of belonging.

If there are differences in the extent to which students feel they belong at university and these are, to a great extent, the result of departmental influence, then some departments might also need to acknowledge that their potential in this respect is more limited. For example, it is evident from the University Life survey that there are important differences between the experiences of students in the Medicine and English departments, possibly resulting from factors such as the physical existence of the Medicine department, the more explicit vocational nature of the Medicine degree, and the stronger extra-curricular bonds that exist between Medicine students. In a broad sense, it may be fair to conclude that English students will never feel the same about their department as Medicine students and that, consequently, their sense of belonging may never be as great. Although the English department might usefully look at practices in Medicine and seek to adapt these or learn from them to the benefit of its own students, these might not be readily adaptable, or even appropriate, to English leaving potential for interventions at a College or University level.

At a more strategic level, there would seem to be a role for Staff Development in facilitating the exchange of good practice in this context between departments and colleges. In the past, Leicester forums such as the Teaching and Assessment Network brought staff together from non-cognate areas of the University and, by exploring common issues from different perspectives, helped to share good practice and disseminate effective ideas and approaches more widely across the institution. The time might be right to reconsider the role of such cross-disciplinary forums, whether at a College or a University level, or possibly both, in facilitating debate and deliberation of these issues with a view to spreading and developing good practice.
11.2 Central University Services

Central University services interacting directly with students include, the library, and individual support services such as counselling, careers and academic and welfare support. Students in both the first and third year of study gave many examples of positive experiences with Central Support Services but regardless of which services were used it was a great deal of comfort to students knowing there was someone at the University to talk to with any concerns or issues they may have, academic or otherwise. Even if they had not needed to discuss any problems it was reassuring for them to know that help is available.

Students acknowledged the approachability of staff across the services and were particularly grateful, not only for the accurate advice given, but also for the communication that exists between the members of staff across the services. Students were confident that most central support staff could direct them to the appropriate source of help if they were unsure who to approach and, in some cases, offer to talk to the academic staff on their behalf.

The David Wilson Library was highlighted as being an excellent centrally located recourse providing a great location for independent study but also, very importantly, a meeting place for students outside of timetabled classes to carry out group work. There was, however, a heavy demand on the rooms set aside for group work along with the computing facilities within the library.

1. General Comments and Awareness

The majority of students at the University of Leicester do not need to use the Central Support Services on a regular basis. Those that do, however, are almost universal in their praise of the services offered. A Geology student commented in the National Student Survey about the:

“Fantastic pastoral support [they had received] throughout [their course]” (NSS comment, Geology student)

Although many students have only used the Central Support Services on a few occasions, if at all, it is clear that knowing the services are there for them if they are required is a great source of reassurance throughout their time at the University:

“They are so supportive here at Leicester; you wouldn’t find this back home, the University providing so much support to the students. [At Leicester] you find a person to help with every issue you have; it doesn’t matter what it is, there is someone to help you... I didn’t know how good the support was before I came here, I’d heard that it had got some great feedback from its students, but I didn’t know about the actual support they would provide so when I came here I was like ‘Wow! This is really, really good!’” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student interviewee)

There were occasions when a small number of students seemed uncertain where to go for help with some specific non-course related problems; a first year video diary
contributor, for example, talked briefly about some financial concerns she was having and that she was uncertain who to approach. There was evidence, however, of the University raising awareness of the services particularly during induction week and through posters and leaflet distribution (such as the ‘Making Connections’ pamphlets) and consequently the majority of students knew there was help available for almost any issue they may encounter and they certainly had a good understanding of the support services the University offers:

“I don’t really feel that any of those things apply to me yet although we did have introductory talks when we came so you know there is help available and you know where to go to get that help” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“Everybody’s aware [of the support that is available] and I’ve noticed you go up to the notice boards or in the loos and stuff and there’s posters for things like welfare-based help lines; and little tear off numbers if you need to go ring someone about something” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“Pastoral support is good and made obviously available” (First year undergraduate English student questionnaire respondent)

Students who had used the central support talked mainly about the individual services (see section 2 below) but one area that was appreciated by all the students, regardless of the actual service they used, was the level of communication that exists between the services. Staff at the AccessAbility Centre, for example, ensured that students were directed to someone who can help them if they did not feel they could be of assistance and, very importantly, they would make contact on the students’ behalf. A student who had studied previously at other HE institutions had been very impressed with this level of communication when he needed help with accommodation:

“When you’re at a new institution you don’t necessarily know where to go for help, and you can end up being sent to different people because somebody’s not quite sure. [At Leicester] everybody seemed to know… They didn’t just say ‘Oh, that’s not my job’, they knew ‘That’s not my job, but I think it’s so-and-so’s but I’ll go and get them and find out’ … I did have problems because I didn’t have accommodation and a combination of the Students’ Union and [an advisor] in Welfare Support, got together and organised accommodation for me and it was there that day, or the following day; it was done pretty quickly. So I was quite impressed at the two working together because sometimes in the past, I’ve been to a Students’ Union for help and it’s very much an ‘us and them’ situation; whereas this was ‘OK, you go to this person but I’ll ring them for you and they’ll come over and see you here’ (PhD Engineering student interviewee)

Knowing this level of knowledge and communication exists at the University is reassuring for students as they know they can approach any one of the support services if they have a problem and they will be directed to the appropriate service for them.
11.2.2 Individual Services

A selection of students were chosen to take part in the research because they are regular users of the AccessAbility Centre and consequently their experience with the AccessAbility Centre was discussed in some depth. Students also talked about their experiences with Student Counselling and Mental Wellbeing, the Student Welfare Service, the Student Development Service and the David Wilson Library.

11.2.3 AccessAbility Centre

The effectiveness of the support offered by the AccessAbility Centre cannot be over emphasised:

“The Accessibility centre has been excellent in the help and support of students”
(NSS Comment, Psychology student)

Without the support and help offered by the AccessAbility Centre some students would have struggled to progress and in certain cases the help offered to students in actually making the transition to study at the University was of paramount importance:

“My transition to higher education becomes easier because I have a lot of support from Accessibility” (Postgraduate Law student interviewee)

Several international students found the services offered by the Centre to be far better than they would have in their own country:

“I think my attitude has changed a little in comparison to in Greece because here they support a lot – like Accessibility and Student Development. And because they are more supportive you’re not stressed as much; and because you’re less stressed you feel more balanced… I’d like to say thank you to Accessibility and Student Development for their help because they do excellent work; I can see the improvement in my English from my assignments from all these hours – and they spent a lot of hours… If I didn’t have help I would fail more assignments or press them for more extensions or transfer to part-time because I am very, very slow. I would struggle more now but I’ve learnt a lot of things and I’m OK. If I didn’t have this support I would be more stressed and I would feel more desperate about what you’re supposed to do. Now I feel more confident” (Postgraduate Law student interviewee)

There were many examples of how the AccessAbility Centre have helped students and a section of quotes showing the variety of issues are given below including examples of specific interventions that help make students’ everyday life a little easier such as the ‘white card system’ they have in place in the library and the tutorials or group work sessions the AccessAbility Centre runs. The effective level of communication that exists with academic staff and other central support services was also mentioned and the words of encouragement they offer to students at certain times of the year were appreciated:
“I don’t know if you’ve come across this - but they give you a white card and that just shows the library staff that you need some help, you don’t need to go into explaining why you need to use the lift or why you need books carrying for you, or why you need a trolley. If you’ve got a white card, you get help but without going into anything, which makes it a really good and really simple idea” (PhD Engineering student interviewee)

“They often run tutorials or group sessions to teach learning methods, revision methods, things like that, which a dyslexic person would find more difficult to do without that. A lot of what they go over I’ve fortunately had the blessing of covering, but I can see the benefits that it provides to everybody else. For example, a friend of mine in the Medical School – who has only since he’s come to Medicine been diagnosed as dyslexic… the Accessibility Centre for him is just like the Holy Grail. They’ve helped him so much and there’s lots of things they offer: that along with the Disabled Students’ Allowance that allows you to access their oral dictation programmes, laptops - all those other resources – that makes it good” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“I talked to the Accessibility Centre and they’re fantastic and have helped me with lots of stuff. There are a few people there that said a few people in the Med School don’t understand dyslexia; they haven’t been taught what it means and so it’s quite obvious for them to presume the typical ‘laziness’ or ‘excuse’ reasons for it, which for me having had it all my life I know isn’t true… The Med School is a very closed off environment compared to the rest of the University: there are only a few individuals in there who understand about dyslexia, I think” (First year undergraduate Medicine interviewee)

“They’ve been very supportive, they send emails round saying things like ‘Good luck in your exams’” (PhD Engineering student interviewee)

Another student described how effective having a single person in charge of the AccessAbility Centre is compared to other institutions:

“Some of my other choices didn’t have a single person in charge of the disabilities centre so it’s not as easy because the departments don’t always work together; so like accommodation or finance… One university I looked at, they said ‘Talk to the other one’ and then when you do talk to the other one, they say ‘Go back and talk to the first one you talked to!’” (First year undergraduate Interdisciplinary Science student interviewee)

One student liked the fact that they allowed you to ‘drop in’ and be able to speak to someone straight away:

“Being able to nip in with queries and just be able to see somebody; I think that’s great… I’m not the most organised of people so sometimes it may be last minute, but they’re always really helpful” (Postgraduate Museum Studies student interviewee)

11.2.4 Student Counselling and Mental Wellbeing
Students welcomed having someone to talk to about issues they encountered that were part of university life but not relevant to their academic studies; a couple of students recognised that the Student Counselling and Mental Wellbeing Service provides this opportunity:

“With my personal tutor I only speak to her about academic issues. For my first two years, when I had any non-academic issues, I often went to the student counselling service, just to get some emotional support. I kind of thought that I shouldn’t muddy the waters, if that makes sense? I should keep the academic and the emotional side separate because if I didn’t do that, things might get a bit confused... I was made aware of the Counselling service when I arrived in Leicester; they gave me a welcome pack and it was all in there” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

One student in particular explained how she had struggled with the social aspects of university life and how having someone to talk to in Counselling had really helped her:

“I did use the Counselling service but I wouldn’t have used my tutor as an initial route to that because I felt that it was a separate thing that was related to the academic side of university... I remember seeing a sign up… I just felt at the time that I wasn’t completely happy at the University so that’s why I went to see them about it; it’s a really useful service. It was particularly to do with the fact that I don’t drink and I was going out with my friends but feeling a lot of peer pressure to drink... they reassured me that it wasn’t me that had the problem. It’s not them with a problem either, it’s just a kind of mismatch of priorities... Earlier conversations with friends had helped as well, but counselling in the first year definitely helped to make that concrete for me and make me realise it’s not my fault. And to hear about other students in that same situation because I honestly thought it was just me... the Counselling service were really useful in the first year” (Third year undergraduate Media and Communications student interviewee)

11.2.5 Student Welfare Service

Students’ comments about the Welfare Service were limited to examples of the excellent help they received. Several members of staff were praised for their help with financial concerns:

“Prior to coming here I was getting stressed out about money, about the whole student loans thing. I remember getting a letter from Student Loans saying ‘You’re not getting any money through us’ and I really freaked out... I’d made several phone calls to Student Welfare and [the advisor] was really helpful and she told me what my options were if I didn’t end up getting money. It was really nice to talk to her and it all worked out fine... I hope people realise just how much she does for students... it made a very positive impression to start university with, which I think is crucial to any student’s experience” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“I’ve gone to the Welfare office in the Students’ Union because I was really struggling financially and I didn’t know where to go; I just rang up the Welfare number and they said ‘Come in and speak to us’. So that’s only been about finance but I know they’re
there if I need them for other things – like if there was a discrepancy with a mark or something, they would speak to the tutors” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“My Dad didn’t send the money through because he had a problem... So I rang up [Welfare] and spoke to the lady in charge of the financial side and it was a really relaxed, casual conversation... they were really good and sympathetic about it; they worked out what my problem was and they were just like ‘Look, it happens’... and that was fine; they gave me a one-week extension and I paid” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

None of the students had anything negative to report about the Welfare Service although a first year Medical Student who needed to approach Welfare for help with accommodation thought it would be useful to provide some literature to guide students as the processes involved in applying and living in accommodation can be confusing:

“Perhaps just a little booklet that says be careful who you choose your house with, you’re going to be with them for a year; make sure you start looking soon. And then also maybe a list of average prices so people know if they’re being ripped off” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

11.2.6 The David Wilson Library and Student Development

Students acknowledged the relatively new David Wilson Library and considered it to be a great resource; especially the students who had used or seen other University libraries.

“I particularly like this library; it’s a great place to come and study. I bring my laptop in and plug into the network and just get all your lectures and everything there” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“I’ve experienced another university’s library, but this is above and beyond that” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“The library & its resources are unfaultable! There is plenty of quiet space to work, & much help available when required” (NSS comment, Psychology student)

One student talked about how important it was to have somewhere that they could go and study:

“The library is where I feel most comfortable because it’s got a restaurant, it’s got computer rooms; it’s basically got everything you need to study. I do most of my work in here because I’m one of those annoying people that cannot concentrate at home so I spend quite a lot of time in here doing essays and stuff” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Giving students the opportunity to work together is an important way of encouraging students to interact with each other and develop relationships that are crucial to a
positive university experience. Having spaces to work together away from timetabled contact time is important and the library provides rooms that students can book for group work sessions. The value of these rooms was certainly recognised:

“There are rooms at the side that you can hire for one or two hours, they’re brilliant but there’s not enough of them” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“The library has been really useful for this project as there are group rooms where we could get together and use a computer” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student video diary entry)

The only real issue was that there were not enough of these rooms available and consequently students often tended to talk in the quiet study areas of the library.

There were only two other problems mentioned by the students. Firstly, there was a consensus that there were insufficient computers available to students who did not like using computers in other buildings as an alternative:

“There’s a lack of computers: trying to find a computer in the afternoon, you can’t and the trouble with using computers in other buildings is that you can go in and settle down for half an hour, and a tutor will come in and say ‘I’ve got a class now. I need all these computers’” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Some students (especially third year students) expressed annoyance that often these computers were used for non-academic purposes with one student saying they would like to see Facebook banned from the library:

“There’s not enough computers: if you come in before three o’clock – because that’s when people tend to go home – you’re hard pushed to find a computer anywhere. And it’s all people Internet shopping, watching videos on YouTube, or on Facebook. And because I’m in the SSC, I have said they should ban Facebook in the library: they said ‘We can’t do that, we want the library to be a ‘homely’ place where people feel they can come’. I said ‘That’s fair enough but it’s a place of study. And when I go to the desk downstairs, they give me a list and say ‘Find somewhere else on the campus’. Why can’t the people who want to go on Facebook find somewhere else on campus?’” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

This is a difficult issue, however, as allowing students to interact physically and virtually is central to their university experience.

Secondly, the students expressed concern at the lack of certain key texts at key times during their course:

“Right now it’s dissertation and exams time so you’re not getting hold of a book. And even if you put it on hold, they’ve got seven days to return it, so that’s seven days plus some people would be able to cover the fines so they keep it, but who wouldn’t? If I knew I was going to benefit from having that book for a couple more days by getting a first, then you’d probably think ‘Well, it’ll cost me £5 to write this essay’. But that drives me insane” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)
“The library is quite well stocked in most modules, although wanting in my Russian and French literature course… But that’s alright; you can’t expect them to cover everything” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Finally a couple of students gave examples of the help provided by the Student Development Zone:

“The support services like Student Development are very helpful and support a lot. I think they do excellent work… If I didn’t have help I would fail more assignments; I would be more stressed and I would feel more desperate about what you’re supposed to do. Now I feel more confident” (Post Graduate Law student interviewee)

“For my first assignment in every subject, I didn’t do that well; I didn’t actually know what they expected from it. We were told to write a descriptive essay but I didn’t have experience of writing that type of essay. I went to Student Development here and I just picked up some leaflets and went through them; and they were really helpful” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student interviewee)
11.3 Managing Student Expectations
Going to university, for the majority of students, is a very challenging time. Many undergraduate students move away from their home for the first time, leaving behind their family and friends and accepting many new responsibilities while at the same time trying to cope with a higher level of study than they were previously used to. Most students cope well with these changes but the research suggests that a large proportion of students find at least some part of the process difficult.

Students approaching higher education with realistic expectations are less likely to face what they see as insurmountable problems and are consequently more likely to succeed and, crucially, less likely to withdraw from their courses. Students felt that schools and colleges should take some responsibility in ensuring their students have realistic expectations of what studying in higher education involves but they also valued the advice and guidance received from the University prior to starting their courses and, although there were some suggestions for improvements, this appears to be an area that the University of Leicester excels in compared to the students’ experiences at other HE institutions. There was also a need for the University to provide effective advice and guidance for students when they first arrive at the University as even the most prepared student will probably encounter difficulties as they attempt to cope with the myriad of changes a move into higher education presents.

11.3.1 Pre-Course Communication

The advice and guidance the University of Leicester offers to students prior to starting their course was, in many cases, instrumental in students’ decision to study at the University:

“I got in touch [with the English Department] because I was part way through an Access course and I didn’t really want to finish it because it wasn’t relevant anymore and they were really helpful and actually just sent me some tests which I completed and they were like ‘Come here then’... They were just really, really keen; I had a really good attitude from them so that made me feel welcome... So I’d gone to them casually asking a question and then I was suddenly offered a place on the strength of it” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Students talked about how the open days and pre-course visits stood out in comparison to other HE institutions:

“I provisionally picked six Universities then I went round all of them to have a good look; all of the courses looked good but it was the open days that I went to that really sold it for Leicester” (Postgraduate Museum Studies student interviewee)

This seemed to be a result of the friendly, organised and non patronising approach of the University’s staff and students:

“I went to loads of open days at different universities, and each one was really different; they talked about ‘Why we would want you at our uni’, ‘These are all the
requirements and you probably don’t reach them all, so go away!’ Whereas here they were friendly with you and they said ‘Why would you want to come here?’ and made you feel welcome, which I didn’t get from anywhere else” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“The person who took me round was the best; they were just very friendly and would tell you stories about the university and things about the course. It was really well organised and you got a chance to see the department and the whole university and then they’d take you out to see the halls” (Postgraduate Museum Studies student interviewee)

The student ambassadors were very highly regarded and the students commented that they really appreciated having approachable and friendly students who were clearly willing to offer help and advice to them if needed:

“I found it helpful having one of the ambassadors take us round; she was very helpful and said to me if I wanted to go and chat to her about doing English here then I was more than welcome to. So it was really helpful that she was friendly and approachable. I think that was the main thing, that people do seem friendly” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

One student went as far as to say they actually felt that the University of Leicester had a real ‘family feel’ which was certainly something he had not found during visits to other HE institutions:

“When I came to Leicester it had a real family-feel, kind of friendly, everybody I spoke to was open and there were loads of people who were like ‘Oh yeah, come to Leicester; we have a great time!’” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

Involving current students in open days and pre-course visits was clearly something that prospective students valued and in many cases they often felt more comfortable asking them about general issues to do with studying at the University than they would have been asking an academic staff member. One student suggested that they would also like to have students available to answer questions via the telephone rather than just relying on responses from staff members:

“When I was contacting the international department here, they only had staff responding to our questions; so I would have been more confident if there had been students, even older students responding to our questions” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student interviewee)

Involving students to this extent would almost certainly present logistical problems for the University but there is clearly a need to encourage interaction between prospective and current students at the earliest opportunity and promoting and encouraging the use of social networking sites would provide a platform for much of this communication to take place. This was found to be most effective where the University had set up official groups for students to use and it was clear that where no such groups existed the students felt somewhat disadvantaged:
“I only really vaguely spoke to one of the people in my house before coming here; because there wasn’t a facebook group for my house… it was hard to know which group was the ‘official’ group and which groups had just been started up by random people” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Where the University had taken the initiative to set up social networking groups they were very well received by the students:

“It’s good to know the University can adapt and use something like Facebook” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

It would be beneficial for the University to explore the possibility of creating more of these groups with the aim of encouraging interaction from students across all levels:

“There were quite a lot of groups: there was one for ‘English Freshers starting in 2009’ - and that was really helpful, actually because quite a lot of people who were in their second year joined, and people would ask them questions and they’d give answers. But it was quite a small group, and I think if that was something that was official and lots of people were in it, that would be really helpful” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Students will have clearer and more realistic expectations of what to expect when they start studying at the University when this level of communication exists and one student suggested that it would be useful for the University to monitor these groups and incorporate students’ suggestions into information leaflets that are distributed:

“It might even be worth the university going online and looking at all these blogs, most of which are written by students saying ‘Bring this…’ and the uni could have a leaflet before you get here saying ‘Here’s a list of things you might want to consider bringing to university’” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

He went on to give an example:

“I actually read a very good blog before I came to university, which said a load of things to bring; it said things like ‘On your first day, bring a pack of beer’. Bring a door wedge and wedge open your door at halls and, when people come past, offer them a beer and you’ll make friends” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

Students also thought that it was important to have clear and informative information available via departmental websites to enable them to explore the course content in more detail:

“In prospectuses you get a bit of blurb and you’re not paying much attention to it. So I went online and there’s the actual module breakdown where you can get the handbook online – this was for English” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)
One student in particular was also keen to highlight the importance of communicating with FE colleges and schools and explained how he had chosen to come to Leicester after the University had given a presentation where he was studying for his A Levels:

“I hadn’t heard of Leicester before because I didn’t grow up in England, I grew up in Nigeria. In Nigeria there’s the select number of universities that everyone knew the name of; and the only reason I got to hear about Leicester was when they came to the ‘A’ level school I went to and they gave a presentation” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

11.3.2 Adapting to University Life

The ease at which students adapt to University life varies greatly from student to student and clearly no two student experiences are the same. All students encounter problems and issues they have to overcome, particularly if it is their first time living away from home:

“I don’t think anything prepares you for the reality of it until it actually happens” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Although the open days and conversations with current students were highly beneficial and informative for potential students the interviewees thought that more emphasis should be placed on the initial difficulties they could face with suggestions about how these could be dealt with. One student explained how the initial week of term had been a lot more challenging than they had anticipated:

“In the first term and Freshers’ Week I had a really high expectation and then it was a lot scarier than I thought it was going to be; I just wasn’t prepared for it to be that difficult... just being with loads of people you don’t know and kind of being in a strange environment and being away from home. In terms of the course it’s what I expected but just ‘university life’ was harder than I expected at first. I just think that if people are more aware that it is a difficult transition, that you don’t make friends immediately; you meet people and you have to get to know them. And it’s just a really weird thing to have to do and I didn’t really consider it because everyone was going ‘It’s Freshers: you’ll have the best time ever’ but you’re actually spending all this time with people you don’t know. I just didn’t think about it because no one really said anything to me like ‘It’s going to be really hard’” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

The University should remember how difficult it is for some students moving away from home for the first time to adapt to certain everyday necessities such as cooking and washing and also consider including help and guidance around these issues:

“It took me a while to get used to going out and buying my own food and cooking and all that kind of stuff” (Second year undergraduate Mathematics student interviewee)

11.3.8 Adapting to the Course
For many students the move into higher education requires a considerable change in the way they study and the majority of students struggled to acquire the skills they needed during their first term at the University. This was especially the case for students who had come straight to University from completing their A levels or returned to studying after a period away and were unsure of what would be required of them at a higher level of study:

“A level students are used to having their hands held. They’ve really struggled because it’s such a difference” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“It’s just the move from A levels to a university style of work; not so much surprising, it just doesn’t really quite hit you until you get into it” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

For these students introductory lectures and study skills sessions provide invaluable support and guidance:

“The first couple of introductory lectures were really good and really helped me settle into what was going on” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student interviewee)

“A very big plus is that they did give you a lot of study techniques in the first semester making sure you’re learning in the right way” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

Some students talked in detail about the problems they had encountered when these sessions were either not provided or proved to be inadequate:

“I did not have the skills to write assignments quite well and this troubled me a lot... in the beginning it was quite difficult” (Postgraduate Law student interviewee)

“It’s been better this term because we had a study skills workshop where we were advised on the exams and I thought that was good. Perhaps we could have done with that at the start of term advising us on how to write an academic essay. I feel more confident in that area now” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“If I could make one complaint about the course, it’s that they don’t drill that fact home early enough that you need to be preparing for your exams even before you start the course in a way. Right from the first lecture you need to be making those notes that you’ll be using over Christmas for your exams” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

Departments should also be careful not to assume too much prior knowledge as this third year English student pointed out:

“There’s always an ‘assumed’ knowledge in a lot of English... I don’t just have this innate knowledge’. So that’s the one thing I think is most annoying; when they look at
you and think ‘Why haven’t you got anything to say about this book that you’ve never read in your life?’” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Despite the level and methods of study being difficult for some students making the transition to the University it was clear that the support available to some students via their tutors and fellow students was very effective:

“The support available was just brilliant, like on my course we had a mentoring scheme where people from the first year were paired up with someone from the third year. I got a mentor who had done pretty much the same thing as me, in terms of what she’d done from her GCSEs to college, even going to do a PGCE in English and Media. So all of that was really, really helpful for me to speak to her about it, which helped me think about the content of the course, but also what I could go on to do in the future. All of the support that was available was brilliant, even my tutor was brilliant and all of that academic support” (Third year undergraduate Media and Communications student interviewee)
11.4 Interactions with Personal Tutors and Academic Staff

11.4.1 University Life Survey
The University Life Survey questionnaire (appendix 1) consists of a set of 20 items divided into three scales covering Attitudes, Expectations and overall Sense of Belonging. Four of these items gauge how students perceive staff and their relationships with them and are as follows:

a) Importance of relationship with personal tutor on a scale of 1 (Very important) to 7 (No importance)

b) ‘There is at least one lecturer (or other person) at the University I can talk to if I have a problem’ (Sense of Belonging scale)

c) ‘I know where/who to go to for help if I am having problems with coursework’ (Attitudes scale)

d) ‘The academic staff seem approachable’ (Attitudes scale)

In order to measure the impact of students’ relationships with staff on the three scales, responses to each of the four individual items above were divided into two discrete groups according to whether they scored either high (from one standard deviation (SD) above the mean to 7 [maximum]) or low (from one standard deviation below the mean to 1 [minimum]). This was carried out for students in both the 1st Year and 3rd Year surveys and further analysed to identify any impact of these ratings on their overall scores on the Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scales.

The impact of each of the items for the two different year groups is described below.

Importance of relationship with personal tutor

The analysis shows that, for 1st Years, there were no differences in attitudes or expectations scores but a significant difference in scores on sense of belonging, whilst, for 3rd Year students, no differences were found on any of the three scales. This indicates that 1st Year students who rate their relationship with their personal tutor as being of high importance exhibit a lower sense of belonging to the institution than those who rate their relationship of low importance, although their expectations and attitudes are unaffected. This may be because students who already exhibit a high sense of belonging to the institution for whatever reason, consequently place less importance on their relationship with their personal tutor as a means of developing this, and vice versa. This effect is not apparent in 3rd Year students.
There is at least one lecturer (or other person) at the University I can talk to if I have a problem.

The analysis shows significant differences in scores on all three scales among both 1st Year and 3rd Year students indicating that whether or not students feel that they have someone to talk to about problems is a significant influence on their attitudes, expectations and sense of belonging.
Figure 11.4.3. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 1\textsuperscript{st} Years scoring high or low on whether there is someone they can talk to if they have a problem

Figure 11.4.4. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 3\textsuperscript{rd} Years scoring high or low on whether there is someone they can talk to if they have a problem

I know where/who to go to for help if I am having problems with coursework

The analysis shows significant differences on all three scales among both 1\textsuperscript{st} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} Year students indicating that whether or not students feel that they know where/who to go to for help if they are having problems with coursework is a significant influence on their attitudes, expectations, and sense of belonging.
Figure 11.4.5. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 1st Years scoring high or low on knowing where/who to go to for help with coursework problems

The academic staff seem approachable

The analysis shows significant differences in scores on all three scales among both 1st Year and 3rd Year students indicating that whether or not students feel staff to be approachable is a significant influence on their expectations, attitudes and sense of belonging.
Figure 11.4.7. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 1\textsuperscript{st} Years scoring high or low on whether academic staff seem approachable

- Attitudes
- Expectations
- Belonging

Figure 11.4.8. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 3\textsuperscript{rd} Years scoring high or low on whether academic staff seem approachable

- Attitudes
- Expectations
- Belonging
11.4.2 Early Withdrawal Survey
This survey investigated the reasons why students left their courses early focusing on three key areas:
1. being prepared for/expectations of HE;
2. academic study;
3. personal reasons.
Findings from the survey on the first of these areas (being prepared for/expectations of HE) indicated that 34% (n=113) felt that being ‘disappointed by the amount of teaching and contact hours with staff provided on my course’ was at least of some influence in their decision to leave (a major influence for 12%). Furthermore, findings in the second area (academic reasons) indicated that 43% felt that not being given ‘helpful academic support by my department’ was at least of some influence in their decision to leave (a major influence for 16%), and 25% of respondents regarded the fact that they did not know ‘where to go to seek academic help or advice’ was of some influence (a major influence for 6%).

In terms of their personal reasons for leaving, 33% felt that not being given ‘helpful personal support by my department’ was of some influence in their decision to leave (a major influence for 14%), whilst 28% indicated that they were influenced by not knowing ‘where to seek personal help or advice’ (a major influence for 8%).

Looking at the above findings together suggests that some students (at least about 1 in 6 or 7 on the basis of this survey) at some stage seek either academic or personal support from their department and, for whatever reason, do not receive this. In addition, there are smaller numbers who do not know where to go for such help or advice. The personal tutor system at Leicester is designed to provide a first port of call for students in difficulties with referral then possible to sources of more specific support (largely, although not exclusively, provided by the Student Support and Development Service). Clearly in some cases this is not happening and there may be a link between this perceived shortcoming and some students’ professed disappointment at the provision of staff teaching and contact hours; if this is low, then it is no surprise that students feel less engagement overall with departmental staff and, possibly, their personal tutor.

The survey also sought comments from respondents about their reasons for leaving early. Nearly half of the respondents chose to do so and Figure 11.4.8. below indicates the areas most frequently referred to in these.

Figure 11.4.8: Comments from early leavers about their experiences and their reasons for leaving before completing the course (n=55)
The largest single area of concern revealed by the comments is ‘Poor support from tutors and academic staff’, cited by 27% of those making comments. This is balanced to some extent by the 15% who felt that they did receive ‘helpful support from University staff’, although this was not necessarily from within the department.

The survey also reveals that the most common source of advice consulted by students about their academic or personal difficulties, or guidance in their decision to leave, was personal tutors (70% consulted these) with smaller proportions also seeking help from others within the department or faculty as Figure 11.4.9. below indicates.

This suggests that most students understand that the personal tutor system is intended to be the primary source of help for students and should, in most cases, be their first resort when in difficulty. The fact that a smaller although significant number of students also consult others within the academic arena might be seen either as a signal that the personal tutor system is not completely effective or as a positive indication that there are others willing to offer help.

Figure 11.4.10. below indicates students’ views on whether or not the various sources of help they consulted were helpful to them. It can clearly be seen that, whereas family and friends were almost universally valued for their helpfulness, the ratings for personal tutors were less positive, with just over half (57%) of students who had consulted their personal tutor finding the encounter helpful and over a third (35%) unhelpful. These ratings are less positive than for any of the other potential institutional sources of help (other academic staff, central support services, and department administrator/secretary) used by students, although the numbers in these cases are much lower so should be treated with some caution.
Individual comments from respondents give a picture of some of the problems that students faced when seeking help from personal tutors, including those arising from their lack of awareness of who their personal tutor actually was (reflected in a similar lack of awareness on the part of the tutor) and difficulties in contacting them:

‘I feel that university life was very much isolated. I felt that I couldn’t gain help or support with my work with a lecturer without using email. I felt that my course was unbelievably impersonal and I found it difficult to speak in person with someone about my work. I feel that email was far too commonly used as a method of communication. When I went to withdraw I was told to speak to my personal tutor. I had no idea who he/she was. We had never been introduced and this was 8 weeks into the course. He had no idea who I was either.’ (Psychology undergraduate student)

‘We had no personal tutor meetings and when I tried to discuss issues my personal tutor told me they were busy. This made me feel very helpless and stuck in a bad situation. My personal tutor only replied after I contacted the head of department.’ (Politics undergraduate student)

Some postgraduate students encountered similar difficulties with their supervisors:

‘I did not want to leave but my research tutor was not supportive enough. He failed me twice even when I appealed. He was very discriminatory. He never agreed to help me. He said Masters’ students do not need help so I was working without help all by myself. I felt that I should have been given help on a one to one basis by the
personal tutor who marked my research project for the first time instead of being rejected to work by myself.’ (Social Work taught postgraduate student)

‘If / when I wrote to my supervisor he wouldn’t always respond, especially at the end. Not great when you’re doing a PhD 100 miles away and have a family.’ (Research postgraduate student)

By contrast, those students who reported a better relationship with academic staff often found the support and help provided to be useful:

‘In deciding what course to take my supervisor was patient, available and extremely helpful. My head of department also offered advice, although to a lesser extent. Once I had decided to transfer to my second year the post graduate secretary gave me advice and assistance on the process which was extremely helpful. Overall my experience of support staff is extremely positive.’(History research postgraduate student)

‘I enjoyed the work and it was a difficult decision to leave, but a personal one. My tutor did everything she could to make things easy for me.’ (Cardiology research postgraduate student)

11.4.3 Implications

Both the surveys indicate the crucial importance of personal tutors and the relationships that students establish with them. In the first instance, the University Life Survey indicates that personal tutors play a key role in helping students to establish their sense of belonging within the institution. Indeed, the evidence suggests that students with a low sense of belonging to the institution rate the importance of their relationship with their personal tutor more highly than students with a greater sense of belonging. More generally, their feeling that staff are ‘approachable’, that they know who/where to go if they are having problems with coursework, and that there is someone that they can go to if they have a problem also impacts on their attitudes, expectations and sense of belonging. In the second instance, the Early Withdrawals Survey, the evidence points to the influence of the student-personal tutor relationship on whether or not a student remains on their course. This seems to happen in two ways: firstly, the lack of an effective relationship, as evidenced by students’ not receiving helpful academic or personal support from within their departments, is cited by many students as one of the primary reasons for their withdrawal; secondly, in attempting to resolve their problems, many students seemed to seek help in the first instance from their personal tutors, but subsequently found this to be less than satisfactory. This may then be a contributory factor in their decision to leave.

The University’s review of the personal tutor system, examining the perspectives of both staff and students on its operation and effectiveness, is, in part, an outcome of the Student Retention and Success project and is timely. It is important that the institution investigates how this system works in practice as the evidence, from both these surveys, is that it is crucial to the sense of belonging of many students but that its impact is patchy. In other words, where it works well it makes a major contribution to students’ general integration into the University and, at the individual level, it can make the difference between a student’s leaving their course and choosing to stick with it. In this respect, it is important to ensure consistency across the institution so
that all students can be confident of the level of academic and personal support available to them; the demand for this is likely to grow, rather than diminish, with the imminent post-Browne changes to the funding regime. Different cultures prevail across different departments and, whilst it is understandable and even desirable that this is so, these variations must not be allowed to undermine students’ legitimate expectations in terms of appropriate support and advice.

The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice in HE might provide a useful starting point for addressing some of these issues. As all new academic staff are now required to take the qualification, consideration should be given to including the role of the personal tutor, and the particular skills and attributes that this role demands, within the curriculum. Although not all academic staff will take on the responsibility of being a personal tutor, there is a strong argument for developing these skills more widely within the academic body. The University Life Survey identified the connection between students’ attitudes, expectations and sense of belonging and their perception that staff were approachable. The inclusion of appropriate elements within the training of new academic staff to reflect the importance of ‘staff approachability’ as a factor in helping students integrate into the University would explicitly signify that this issue had been acknowledged and was being addressed.

Highlighting the role of the personal tutor, and of other departmental academic and non-academic staff, in helping students to feel a sense of belonging with the institution has more far-reaching implications. Clearly, personal tutors, and other academics, might have considerable expertise in dealing with academic matters but rather less so in handling any personal and related problems that students might bring to them. The findings of the Early Withdrawal Survey, revealing that in relation to students’ personal reasons for leaving early, 33% felt that not being given ‘helpful personal support by my department’ was of some influence in their decision to leave whilst 28% indicated that they were influenced by not knowing ‘where to seek personal help or advice’, indicate that this is an area for attention. Personal tutors might feel, with justification, ill-equipped to respond to such enquiries and therefore reluctant to get involved. The University has specialist resources available to help such students (largely those provided by the Student Support and Development Service), however, and personal tutors, and others, have a crucial part to play in acting as referrers or gatekeepers to these. Once again, however, it should not be assumed that this role is either comfortable or straightforward and staff involved in providing such signposting need guidance, support and training to help them do so effectively.
12. Key Messages, Implications and Recommendations

Six key themes emerged from the results. These themes are important for students to establish confidence and a sense of ‘belonging’ throughout their course. These are; personal tutors and other staff relationships, departmental culture and curriculum methods, managing expectations, central services, social spaces and clubs and societies. These would be the instinctive key themes but having briefings with the evidence that demonstrates the importance of these areas provides a resource for all institutions when planning policy and strategy. We have already used this work to guide strategy within our own institution and within this report we use the theme of personal tutors as a case study to demonstrate how staff and students working together can change policy in order to enhance the student experience.

In addition to the institutional policy implications which have emerged from our work, one key recommendation is that these student support activities carried out by both academic and support staff must be recognized by HEIs as a very important role and rewarded accordingly. Most institutions have well developed promotion and reward policies but these are often focused on subject-specific research (Higher Education Academy, 2009), and although some institutions now are implementing policies to reward teaching and learning activities (Cashmore & Ramsden, 2009), it is vital that pastoral activities are given recognition for staff to take them seriously.
13. Conclusion

In summary we have identified key themes that help with students having a sense of belonging and intimacy. Working with students and University Committees we are reviewing practice in the areas of these themes to maintain and enhance our good student experience. We have produced resources that will help inform strategic planning of both our own institution and others and tools that will aid data collection in different situations. Collaborations between students and staff have proved particularly successful in moving towards new policies and embedding our findings. The longer term aim is to increase these partnerships in order to improve the student experience.
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Appendix 1

University Life Questionnaires

a. General questionnaire
b. Post-induction first year questionnaire
Student Retention and Success Project Survey

This survey consists of several statements about you and your experience of university life so far. Please circle the answers you feel are most appropriate. Details about your rights as a survey respondent and issues regarding confidentiality are provided on Page 5.

### University Life Questionnaire

Please rate how important the following have been in helping you settle into university life. Circle “1” if you think they have been very important, “7” if you think they have been of no importance, or an appropriate number in between.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>No importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Your family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Your old friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Your new friends (who you have met since starting your course)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Your personal tutor</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. University staff within your department</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. University staff OUTSIDE your department</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Induction events directly associated with your course and/or department</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Inductions to services and facilities OUTSIDE your department</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Your accommodation arrangements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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For the following section, please circle a number to indicate your level of agreement with each statement. Circle “1” if you strongly agree that the statement applies to you, “7” if you strongly disagree, or an appropriate number in between if your agreement is intermediate.

<p>| | | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I have the study skills necessary to complete the course</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I don’t know where/who to go to for help if I am having problems with coursework</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I am happy with the course timetable</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I am able to cope with the course workload</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I do not have problems finding my way around the department and university campus</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I know where/who to go to for help if I am having problems with coursework</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I feel overwhelmed by all the information I have been given</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>My family and friends are supportive of me going to university</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The academic staff seem approachable</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I find the course workload difficult to cope with</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I have a suitable background in the subject I am studying</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I might not have the study skills necessary to complete the course</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Below are four statements concerning your choice of course/university. Circle “1” if you strongly agree that the statement applies to you, “7” if you strongly disagree, or an appropriate number in between if your agreement is intermediate.

1. I think I chose the right university for me
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

2. University life is exactly how I thought it would be
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

3. I have thought about leaving the course / university
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

4. It would not take a lot for me to abandon my goals at university
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

5. The course fits my expectations
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

6. Overall, I am happy with my choice of course
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

7. I do not let anything get in the way of achieving my goals at university
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

8. I think I chose the wrong university for me
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

---

**What factors, people or activities have enabled you to feel settled (or otherwise) at University?**
Sense of Belonging

For the following section, please circle a number to indicate your level of agreement with each statement. Circle “1” if you strongly agree that the statement applies to you, “7” if you strongly disagree, or an appropriate number in between if your agreement is intermediate.

1. I feel like a part of the university

   strongly agree  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  strongly disagree

2. There is at least one lecturer (or other person) in the department I can talk to if I have a problem

   strongly agree  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  strongly disagree

3. I feel included in my department

   strongly agree  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  strongly disagree

Can you suggest any ways that the University of Leicester could help students to communicate more effectively with each other and their lecturers and/or tutors?

Please list up to three things you particularly like about the University of Leicester:

1) 

2) 

3) 

Please list up to three things you particularly dislike about the University of Leicester:

1)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Sex:</strong></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th><strong>Age:</strong></th>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Status:</strong></th>
<th>Home/EU</th>
<th>Overseas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Department:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Course:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity:</strong></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disability:</strong></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mode of study:</strong></td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Combined</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Highest qualifications prior to starting the course:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>A-Levels</td>
<td>Access course</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did you gain a place through clearing:</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Was Leicester your first choice:</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Have any members of your family attended/graduated from university:</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What are your parents'/guardians’ occupations:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Mother:</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Father:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Term time accommodation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>With parents/guardians</td>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>With partner</td>
<td>Shared house</td>
<td>Halls of residence</td>
<td>Self-catered halls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Have you ever lived independently before coming to Leicester University (i.e. not with parents/guardians):</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>If you live in a shared house, are your housemates:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other course members</td>
<td>Students from other courses</td>
<td>Non-students</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Have you joined any clubs, societies or other social groups since starting university:</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Who do you mainly socialise with during term-time:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course members</td>
<td>Clubs/society members</td>
<td>Housemates</td>
<td>Friends from home</td>
<td>Other (please state)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Have you made friends via social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) at university:</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Are you working, or do you intend to work during term time to help fund your studies:</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If yes, how many hours a week?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Do you have any dependants who rely on you financially:</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Approximately how many hours per week do you spend (tick the appropriate box):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>0-5 hours</th>
<th>5-10 hours</th>
<th>10+ hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In lectures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In tutorials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In practical sessions / workshops</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working alone (library, home etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

All the data will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act and the University's Data Protection Code of Practice and no one will be able to obtain any information about you from any of the published material.

We would like to talk in more detail to a selection of first year students from the University of Leicester about some of the issues addressed in this questionnaire. If you would be willing to talk to us please supply your contact details below:

Name:

Telephone:

E-Mail:

Thank you for taking part!

Questions or queries regarding this survey can be directed to:

Martin Pennington mjp26@le.ac.uk
(Student Support and Development Service)
Ist Year Post-Induction Survey

This survey consists of several statements about you and your experience of university life so far. Please circle the answers you feel are most appropriate. Details about your rights as a survey respondent and issues regarding confidentiality are provided on Page 5.

University Life Questionnaire

Please rate how important the following have been in helping you settle into university life. Circle “1” if you think they have been very important or “7” if you think they have been of no importance. Circle “4” if you have no opinion either way.

1. Your family
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

2. Your old friends
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

3. Your new friends (who you have met since starting your course)
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

4. Your personal tutor
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

5. University staff within your department
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

6. University staff OUTSIDE your department
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

7. Induction events directly associated with your course and/or department
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

9. Inductions to services and facilities OUTSIDE your department
   Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

10. Social events (e.g. clubs and societies events)
    Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance

11. Your accommodation arrangements
    Very important  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  No importance
For the following section, please circle a number to indicate your level of agreement with each statement. Circle “1” if you strongly agree that the statement applies to you, “7” if you strongly disagree, or some number in between if your agreement is intermediate. Circle “4” if you neither agree nor disagree.

1. **Overall, I am happy with my choice of course**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

2. **I have thought about leaving the course / university**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

3. **I have the study skills necessary to complete the course**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

4. **I have a suitable background in the subject I am studying**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

5. **I am happy with the course timetable**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

6. **I am able to cope with the course workload**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

7. **I know where/who to go to for help if I am having problems with coursework**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

9. **I do not have problems finding my way around the department and university campus**
   - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

10. **I feel overwhelmed by all the information I have been given**
    - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

11. **I think I chose the right university for me**
    - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

12. **My family and friends are supportive of me going to university**
    - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

13. **The course fits my expectations**
    - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

14. **The academic staff seem approachable**
    - strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree
# Sense of Belonging Scale

This questionnaire consists of 16 statements about your sense of belonging to university and university life. After each statement, you should circle a number to indicate your level of agreement with the statement. Circle “1” if you strongly agree that the statement applies to you, “7” if you strongly disagree, or some number in between if your agreement is intermediate. Circle “4” if you neither agree nor disagree.

<p>| | | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Fellow students accept me</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>What I offer is valued</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I often meet or contact other students</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I feel like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I wonder if I really fit in</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I feel like an outsider at university</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I think I fit in with people at university</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I could disappear for days without anyone noticing</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I have no place here at university</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I am part of the university</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>I prefer to observe life at university rather than participate</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Few people would care if I left university</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>I feel included in life at university</td>
<td>strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14. I think people would miss me if I didn’t turn up to lectures
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

15. I don’t feel valued or important
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

16. I rarely feel homesick
   strongly agree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 strongly disagree

Please list up to three things you particularly like about the University of Leicester:
1) 
2) 
3) 

Please list up to three things you particularly dislike about the University of Leicester:
1) 
2) 
3) 

Sex: F M                      Age: _____                      Status: Home/EU Overseas
Department: __________________ Course: __________________
Ethnicity: White Black Asian Mixed Other          Disability: None Dyslexia Other
Mode of study: Full-time Part-time Combined
Highest qualifications prior to starting the course:
Higher education A-Levels Access course Other
Did you gain a place through clearing: Yes No Was Leicester your first choice: Yes No
Have any members of your family attended/graduated from university: Yes No
What are your parents’ occupations:
Mother: ________________________ Father: ________________________
**Term time accommodation:**

- With parents/guardians
- Alone
- With partner
- Shared house
- Halls of residence
- Self-catered halls

**If you live in a shared house, are your housemates:**

- Other course members
- Students from other courses
- Non-students
- Mixed

**Have you joined any clubs, societies or other social groups since starting university:** Yes No

**Who do you mainly socialise with during term-time:**

- Course members
- Clubs/society members
- Housemates
- Friends from home
- Other (please state)

**Have you made friends via social networking sites (e.g. Facebook) at university:** Yes No

**Are you working, or do you intend to work to help fund your studies:** Yes No
If yes, how many hours a week? ____

**Do you have any dependants who rely on you financially:** Yes No

**Approximately how many hours per week do you spend:**

- In lectures: ______
- In tutorials: ______
- In practical sessions / workshops: ______
- Working alone (library, home etc.): ______

**Have you been allocated a personal tutor:** Yes No
If yes, have you met him/her yet: Yes No

**Have you set up a computing account yet:** Yes No

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All the data will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act and the University's Data Protection Code of Practice and no one will be able to obtain any information about you from any of the published material.

We would like to talk in more detail to a selection of first year students from Leicester University about some of the issues addressed in this questionnaire. If you would be willing to talk to us please supply your contact details below:

Name:

Telephone:

E-Mail:
Thank you for taking part!
Questions or queries regarding this survey can be directed to
Kine Dorum, Academic Planning and Research Services
Email: kd41@le.ac.uk
Tel: 0116 2523049
Appendix 2 – Briefing Documents

a. Departmental Culture, Curriculum and Teaching Approaches
b. Central University Services
c. Managing Student Expectations
Student Retention and Success Project
Outcome Briefing 1: Departmental Cultures and Curriculum Methods

1. Project background

The University of Leicester Student Retention and Success Project (funded by HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation) has been investigating ‘Belonging’ and ‘Intimacy’ as themes that have enabled the University of Leicester to be successful in retaining students and in facilitating their success and satisfaction (the University has a high retention rate and extremely high scores in the National Student Survey for satisfaction). Initial investigation of these phenomena, derived from feedback, points to the students ‘feeling a belonging to the institution/department’ and the importance of ‘the intimacy of the institution and its staff’.

The project has followed up these themes quantitatively and qualitatively in order to examine fully what students have acknowledged as actually making a difference.

The more specific objectives of the project are:

- the identification of practices that make a difference in terms of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Intimacy’
- an understanding of how such practices impact on different selected groups of students (across courses and departments; potential and actual withdrawers; students with disabilities etc.);
- recommendations and a model of practice for the institution and the sector;
- an integrated data set related to retention and methodology for continued analysis;
- dissemination activities including conferences, papers and final report.

Research methods so far have included:

1. Examination of existing quantitative data held centrally at the University, including National Student Survey (NSS) 2009 data.
2. A survey (University Life Survey) of about c500 first year students from Biological Sciences (149 students), Medicine (215) and English (132) designed to measure their view of life at university and their sense of belonging.
3. In-depth qualitative interviews with a selection of students completing the above questionnaire.
4. In-depth qualitative interviews with a selection of students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties who had used the University’s AccessAbility Centre.
5. A survey of c1200 students who had withdrawn from the University in the academic years 2007-08 and 2008-09 asking about the reasons for their withdrawal and the support and advice offered whilst they were in the process of doing so, with responses being received from over 100.
6. Examination of reflective video diaries completed by first and second year Biological Sciences students.
7. A survey (University Life Survey) of c200 final year students from Biological Sciences and English along similar lines to 2. above.

2. Background literature

The opportunity for students to learn through interacting with peers, rather than only with a teacher or instructor is a topic that has received much interest among researchers and practitioners. The effectiveness of small-group teaching and self-regulated learning varies
with a number of factors such as type of learning material, type of task, tutor involvement, (Webb, 1989) individual abilities and backgrounds, group size and group dynamics (Webb, 1989). However, on a general level, the method has been found to promote greater academic achievement, more favourable attitudes toward learning, and increased persistence (for a meta-analysis, see Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999). Practice-based small-group learning is a method frequently used in areas such as medicine, nursing and physiotherapy, and studies have shown that this type of approach can help make tasks seem less daunting, facilitate discussion, and make topics ‘come alive’ (Overton, Kelly, McCalister, Jones, & MacVicar, 2009). Within sciences such as geology and archaeology, field trips are an important part of training and practice. This type of informal setting has been shown to have positive effects on the academic side of student life, for example on reasoning ability, but also on the learning experience and interactions of students both with each other and with teaching staff (Gerber, Cavallo, & Marek, 2001).

3. Quantitative findings

3a) National Student Survey (NSS) 2009

The NSS data requires students to assess their institution by answering 21 questions grouped into six broad areas: Teaching and Learning; Assessment and Feedback; Academic Support; Organisation and Management; Learning Resources; and Personal Development. The University of Leicester has always fared well relative to other institutions in the NSS and, generally speaking, results at departmental level are better than the national picture. The means for departmental total NSS scores at Leicester are shown in Figure 1 below.

![Figure 3. Mean NSS scores for individual departments at the University of Leicester](image)

Further examination of these data was carried out to measure the predictive value of department, number of full-time undergraduate students, home/EU-overseas student ratio, and staff-student ratio (excluding distance learners) on the individual subsections of the NSS. This revealed that the only subsection score that could be predicted to a significant level was ‘Teaching on my course’ and that the key variable in this respect was the individual ‘department’.
More specific analysis was subsequently carried out into a small number of departments (Geology with the highest mean NSS score; Psychology and Engineering with the lowest; and Biological Sciences as it was to be the focus of the Student Retention and Success project). The mean NSS subsection scores for these departments are shown in Figure 2 below.

![Figure 4](image_url)

**Figure 4. Mean NSS subsection scores for lowest scoring departments (Engineering and Psychology), highest scoring department (Geology), and Biological Sciences**

The characteristics of these four departments in terms of their NSS respondents was investigated and found to be largely consistent across all departments. All respondents were:

- Young (under 21 on starting their course)
- Without any registered disabilities
- UK/EU-domiciled
- Straight from school/college having studied A levels

The ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds of respondents were more varied although, in two of the departments, all the respondents were White and the socio-economic background of the majority of respondents across all four departments was from higher/lower managerial and professional occupations.

Moreover, across the Leicester NSS as a whole, response rates for different types of students varied revealing that the sample of Leicester students responding to the survey does not give an accurate reflection of the actual population. In more detail:

- The response rate for students from higher status backgrounds (Higher and Lower Managerial: 74% and 76%) was higher than for lower status (Routine Occupations: 63%)
- The response rate for white students (75%) was higher than for students from other ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Black: 66%; Asian: 69%)
- The response rate was higher for UK/EU students (73%) than for international students (64%)
- The response rate for young (under 21 when starting course) students (75%) was higher than for mature students (58%)
It is interesting to note that the under-represented groups are typically those often identified as being most at risk of leaving HE (e.g. Powdthawee and Vignoles, 2009).

An examination of the qualitative part of the NSS, where students were encouraged to add comments on their experience, indicates that students in higher scoring departments emphasise and value ‘community feel’, small group teaching and the approachability of staff, as the following sample statements indicate:

‘Lecturers and demonstrators always enthusiastic and very friendly. They are always around and available to talk to just randomly as a friend, seriously about work, or confidentially about anything personal. Excellent teaching throughout my three years.’ (Geology student)

‘Field trips were fun and extremely educational, allowing you to learn a lot of information in a short time.’ (Geology student)

‘I have felt very at home within the university and more specifically the Geology Department for the past 4 years. Everything has been exceptional.’ (Geology student)

‘The course content has been extremely interesting; most staff are very approachable and are very enthusiastic about their topics and their own research.’ (Biological Sciences student)

‘Field courses stimulated learning a lot due to the involved practical tasks.’ (Biological Sciences student)

‘Following illness, the staff were more than happy to help with catching up missed lectures. Questions and requests are swiftly answered and staff are always happy to help if they can. Clerical staff were always helpful when it came to accessing all departmental students for social activities.’ (Biological Sciences student)

3 b) University Life Survey

As a follow-up to the tentative conclusions drawn from the departmental differences in NSS scores, differences in mean scores on the University Life Survey were measured across three different departments: two science subjects (Biological Sciences and Medicine) and one arts (English). The three departments differ greatly in terms of their course delivery methods, location, and size and it was predicted that this would have an impact on the scores on the three scales (Attitudes: nine items; Expectations: eight items; Sense of Belonging: three items) within the survey (see Table 1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Attitudes Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Expectations Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>5.36 (1.06)</td>
<td>5.46 (0.66)</td>
<td>6.06 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological Sciences</td>
<td>5.55 (0.98)</td>
<td>5.48 (0.63)</td>
<td>5.73 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>5.13 (1.13)</td>
<td>5.41 (0.66)</td>
<td>5.48 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Means and standard deviations for scores on the Sense of Belonging, Attitudes and Expectations scales by department at the University of Leicester

Further analysis was carried out to assess the effects of department on the scores within the different scales.

*Attitudes*
Analysis of responses on the Attitudes scale reveal a significant effect of ‘department’ on the combined items of the scale with significant between-subject effects for four individual items.

5. English students gave significantly lower ratings on ‘I have the study skills necessary to complete the course’ than students from the other two departments.

6. Medical students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘I am happy with the course timetable’ than Biological Science students, who in turn gave higher ratings than English students.

7. Biological Science students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘I do not have problems finding my way around the department and university campus’ than students from the other two departments.

8. There was no difference between Biological Science and Medical students on ‘I feel overwhelmed by all the information I have been given’, and both of these gave higher ratings (i.e. more negative) than English students.

This indicates that English students seem least confident about their study skills but most comfortable with the amount of information provided whilst Medicine students seem happiest about their timetable. Biological Sciences students, however, seem most confident about finding their way around the department and the campus. These findings suggest that both Medicine and Biological Sciences may focus considerable explicit attention on the study skills required for success in their programmes, possibly with the unintended consequence of information overload reported by their students. In English, this focus is less evident resulting in their lower confidence levels but also their lesser anxiety about information provision. It is acknowledged that the course timetable in Medicine and Biological Sciences (in common with most sciences) is fuller and more prescriptive than for English (again in common with many Arts subjects). This might lead to some uncertainty amongst English students about precisely what is expected of them.

Expectations
Analysis of responses on the Expectations scale revealed a significant effect of ‘department’ on the combined items of the scale with significant between-subject effects for two individual items.

3. English students gave significantly lower ratings on ‘I think I chose the right university for me’ than both Medicine and Biological Sciences students.

4. Medical students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘The course fits my expectations’ than both Biological Science and English students.

This indicates that both Medicine and Biological Sciences students seem happier with their choice of university than English students, with Medicine students also feeling most strongly that their course fits their expectations. Again, there is a suggestion of greater anxiety amongst English students about their course leading, perhaps naturally, to a questioning of their choice of university. It is possible that the extreme competition to get a place on a Medicine degree leads to prospective students paying more explicit attention to course requirements such that they are not surprised by any aspect of the course when they start. The
contrast for many English students between their previous school/college experience, where they had little discretionary time, and their university experience, where their timetable is characterised by large blocks of private study, may result in the disjunction displayed by their responses.

**Sense of Belonging**

Analysis of responses on the Sense of Belonging scale revealed a significant effect of ‘department’ on the combined items of the scales with significant between-subject effects for two individual items.

3. Biological Sciences students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘There is at least one lecturer (or other person in the department) I can talk to if I have a problem’ than the other two departments.

4. Both Biological Sciences and Medicine students gave significantly higher ratings on ‘I feel included in my department’ than English students.

This indicates that Biological Sciences students feel more confident about being able to go to someone with a problem than students from the other two departments, and students from both Biological Sciences and Medicine feel more comfortable within their departments than their English counterparts. The former is interesting and there are few obvious potential reasons for this, other than that Biological Sciences has more approachable staff willing to listen to students, suggesting that further research is needed to uncover what lies behind these findings. The second finding may be the result of the greater extent to which students in those departments work closely with each other, in laboratories for example, and their fuller timetable of lectures and practicals, requiring their more frequent common assembly and a greater sense of a shared departmental experience. There are also differences on the ‘I feel like a part of the university’ item but these are not significant.

When the three items of the Sense of Belonging scale were examined separately, the only one that demonstrated a significant impact on the Sense of Belonging overall was the item ‘I feel included in my department’. Medicine students scored highly on this whereas English students’ scores were significantly lower. This suggests that ensuring that students feel a sense of integrity with their department is probably the best way to increase their overall sense of belonging but that departments might need to adopt differential approaches in order to achieve this. In this case, for example, English students have a high sense of belonging to the University but a lower one to their department, whereas for Medicine students the opposite is true, with students from Biological Sciences somewhere in between. The measures taken by the three departments will consequently and necessarily differ reflecting this disparity.

This effect is reinforced by the finding that across the three departments, students who were involved in clubs and societies were more likely to exhibit a high sense of belonging to the University. At the departmental level, however, this disguised the fact that, whilst this was true for English students, for Medicine students membership of clubs and societies was more positively correlated with feeling a belonging to the department. The context for sense of belonging varies, therefore, between disciplines; for students in some it will be located in the department, whereas for others it is more likely to be found at the University level.

6. **Qualitative findings**
4 a) **Teaching methods that enable and encourage interaction**

The majority of students preferred teaching methods that gave them the opportunity to interact with their peers and academic staff although they did recognise occasions where this is not appropriate. Furthermore, a clear distinction was perceived between timetabled small group teaching sessions or seminars and times when they were required to work as a group towards a shared goal often necessitating working outside timetabled contact hours:

“They have seminar groups but it’s not group work; whereas with ours, if we don’t work as a group we won’t complete it in time so we’ve got to learn those team-building skills and that teamwork stuff before we start. I think it’s a really good way to get you introduced; you also get to meet second and third years who you can then ask for support later on if you need it... I doubt our group would have come together if we hadn’t have been put together; we’re a lot of very different characters. We’ve got a weird dynamic there... we wouldn’t have got together naturally but the forced environment works. And that’s really nice.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

Small group teaching and group work were considered particularly important for first year students:

“Seminars I quite like because they’re interactive and you get to meet people; and it changes from the first semester to the second semester so you get to meet more people than you would have met otherwise” (First year English interviewee)

“When we joined the university and got on the course, we were split into seminar groups; and the people who were in my seminar group I kind of stuck with; you’re forced to get on, aren’t you? So that’s how I made friends... there are still people in lectures that I don’t know” (First year English interviewee)

One student in particular went further explaining how important it was for students to be given the opportunity to engage in non-assessed group work so they could get to know each other without worrying too much about the outcome:

“We did non-assessed group work at first, we put on an exhibition, which was great because we got to meet people that you wouldn’t have necessarily already talked to on the course. We got to do a project that was really rewarding and looks really great on a CV and is a real challenge, but it wasn’t assessed so you could make new friends and take it a bit slower and not get really stressed... and then we used the same groups for our next project, which was assessed, so that really helps because you’re friends with them already.” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

Some video diary submissions from second year Biological Sciences students support the view that departments should provide initial opportunities for students to work together without marks being at stake. In one video a student describes how he does not advocate group work in the second and third year as attributing marks for a group project when individuals’ contributions varied was problematic (VD Cohort 2 - S28 2y), a sentiment
echoed by another 2nd year student (VD Cohort 2 - S05 2y – 06:48). Another video diary contributor from the same cohort complained that some students seemed to dominate and take over the group work activities.

Nevertheless, a first year Biological Sciences student explained how important group activities had been in helping her form friendships, having felt quite alone at the start of her course as her family and friends were abroad:

“We had to do presentations in pairs and other kinds of activities... I managed to make many friends and because we went out one or two times [it brought us] closer together. I made friends from other countries as well and that's very good because it's important for me to have someone here [who is not] from England because my parents are away and my friends are away so it was quite lonely at the beginning. So it really helps.” (First year Biological Sciences interviewee)

The benefits of small group teaching and seminars are not just limited to assisting first year students, but recognised throughout the course:

“I think that's the challenge with bigger departments, how do you encourage people to make friends? When you're in smaller seminar groups you tend to meet other people. Then by the second year you're pretty much in seminars the whole time... So that worked quite well. And you always meet different people because you pick different options every time... I just picked the modules I wanted and made some new friends.” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

A Psychology student commented in the National Student Survey about feeling very disadvantaged as no seminar or discussion groups existed alongside some of the lectures. The student was not comfortable contacting members of academic staff with any academic issues or problems as they felt their relationships with their lecturers were not strong enough:

“There’s too much non-contact time; there should be seminars or discussion groups for lectures in the second and third year... I do not feel in contact personally with many members of staff to go to when needed as lectures are very impersonal” (NSS comment, Psychology)

By contrast, a first year medical student was keen to point out how important having tutorials alongside lectures is for students:

“I think the fact that we have group work and tutorials kind of links us to [the academic staff] so we can actually talk to them face-to-face rather than just seeing them at the front of the lecture theatre. They tend to impart their knowledge, they don’t just answer the questions and move on; they sort of talk to us about medicine and spark an interest in us about what they’re particularly interested in. And I think that helps, to see them as people” (First year Medicine interviewee)

A video diary submitted by a second year Biological Sciences student also pointed to the benefits of a small group tutorial:

“I had a physiology tutorial that was good, it was useful being in small groups and being able to work through things slowly and have someone to discuss it with.” (Second year Biological Sciences video diary)
Whilst the importance of effective small group teaching and activities is one of the key messages to come out of the qualitative data, it is clear that such opportunities will vary from course to course. Biological Sciences and Medical students have far more timetabled contact hours than the English students for example; the benefits of extended laboratory sessions in enabling students to develop good relationships with their supervisors and peers were mentioned by several third year Biological Sciences students in their video diaries (see 02:55 VD Cohort 1 - S08 3y) and (00:07 VD Cohort 1 - S09 3y)

Some students also discussed the importance of timetabled, but informal, help sessions; sessions they were encouraged to attend to discuss any academic problems or issues that were concerning them:

“You can ask questions during [and after] lectures... but then when I went to the help sessions I found that it’s easier to go there because the time is not very limited, so you can go there and ask them anything you want; because it’s face-to-face it’s easier and they explain things like diagrams or something else that maybe they don’t [explain] in the lecture.” (First year Biological Sciences interviewee)

“On a couple of modules they’ve put in 2-hour help sessions twice a week and they’re really useful if I have anything that I just want to go to talk to a lecturer on a one-on-one basis about” (First year Biological Sciences interviewee)

“We have small group work sessions where you can talk in small groups and go up to the tutor and just ask things; they are there to help you” (First year Medicine interviewee)

Field trips were also viewed as providing excellent opportunities for students to develop friendships not only with their peers, but also with the academic staff accompanying them. Students were subsequently more comfortable approaching academic staff in more formal University settings:

“Field trips away with course mates increased friendships and helped in forming support groups for work” (Third year Biological Sciences questionnaire respondent)

A second year video diary contributor explained how a microbiology field trip had felt really informal and had been a great way to get to know the lecturers on a more equal basis. (see VD Cohort 1 - S03 2y. 00:28) Another second year video diary contributor explained how they hadn’t had the opportunity to go on a field trip but felt that they would have liked to have done (see VD Cohort 2 - S15 2y, 01:53)

4 b) Student-led informal learning
There are many examples of students learning ‘informally’ with each other’s help beyond the timetabled contact hours and group work. One interviewee explained how some PhD students meet informally to discuss their research. Several other students also explained how they meet to help each other out at certain times:

“I made quite a lot of friends just on my course because it’s been really sociable. We’ve all had coursework to do together so we all go round and help each other; like, people come to me with questions and I’ll help them out, and the same the other way. And it’s great just working together and sharing ideas.” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)
“We all go up to the third floor; and some days before assignments, everyone is up there just working and saying ‘Can you help me with this’”’ (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

“It’s quite supportive in a way because you’re all up to the same thing – especially at Christmas with revision: we’d be in the library most days for 8-10 hours so it was nice to have a little social network you could pop down for a cup of tea with.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

These informal meetings and help sessions appear to be natural extensions to relationships formed through course methods and other social activities.

4 c) Additional systems for encouraging peer interaction

In addition to the curriculum methods outlined above, there were systems in place to encourage students to help each other through mentoring and PAL (Peer-Assisted Learning) schemes:

“We have these ‘medic families’. So during Intro Week you get assigned a ‘parent’ – they’re generally second years – introduce you to academic staff and talk you through things, and if you’re stuck on a particular area they’ll just help you out with it” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“I was a bit worried before I started my seminars because I hadn’t been given a timetable and it was about a week before I was due to start, so I was a bit worried about that. But do you know the Pal Scheme? They have second and third year students helping first years: I had an email from the girl I met through that, so I emailed her and asked the question and she said it was fine and I’d get it the next week. So that was helpful” (First year English interviewee)

“On my course we had a mentoring scheme...And we just met up for coffee a few times at the beginning. Also, the first presentation I was doing I was really struggling because I hadn’t done a presentation before in that kind of context – using PowerPoint and film and things I hadn’t used before – so I emailed her about it and she sent me an example where she’d got a first so I could follow it... I found that really helped me as well, just to feel more at ease... She’s my Facebook friend now and I email her: when I was looking for jobs, I’d email her about any interview questions from when she did them and she sent me some interview questions... we decided that we were going to remain professional buddies... I wouldn’t say she’s one of my ‘friends’ now; I’d say it’s more of a ‘working relationship’ if you know what I mean?” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

Another Medicine student gave an example of tutors actually putting students in touch with each other to help with specific problems or concerns:

“So the first week out the molecules module in semester one, I straight away identified that as a problem area for me so I just thought don’t beat around the bush and get behind; so I got straight in touch with them and literally the next day they’d given me the email of another medic to go and talk to. And I’d met up with her within the week and it’s been fantastic, really; magic help... occasionally you’ll come across something where I’ll need a bit of help and I’ll just meet up with her, just for a few hours on an evening or on a weekend – whenever she’s got time, really – and she’ll just go over it with me from her notes in the past etc. But
it’s kind of something that stays with you then until you just don’t need it any more I suppose... I really don’t know what I would have done without that because it really was quite difficult for myself and a number of others; but personally that really works for me – as I think it does for a lot of people.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

4 d) Electronic information delivery and communication

The potential of online resources was recognised by the students, not only as a way of enhancing their learning experience but also as an effective way of communicating with their peers and tutors:

“Blackboard! That’s what surprised me: a lot of people have said their schools had an online learning environment – we didn’t. My school still runs on Windows ‘95... And so Blackboard to me, I was like ‘Wow!’ I was like ‘I can get my lectures online?’ I mean, one of our lecturers this term actually records his lectures and podcasts them. We’ve got very strict rules: we’re not allowed to send them off or distribute them because that’s breach of our contracts with the Med School. But as a learning resource for us, we can download that and we can watch the slides at the same time; so when it comes to revision, we’ve got so many different resources to pull on.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“I like that they upload lecture slides to Blackboard; and I like that they use Blackboard to make announcements and a lot of it is centralised so you can find lecture handouts and seminar preparation that you have to do, and seminar handouts and things like that all on there.” (First year English interviewee)

“It was clear, however, that the students saw the benefits offered as being very dependent on the ability of lecturers to use the resources effectively. A third year English student explained that some lecturers purposefully delayed making slides available on Blackboard until after the lecture itself lest students failed to pay attention to the actual lecture:

“I think some lecturers think that if they put things up there then we won’t pay proper attention or something, because not everyone puts things on Blackboard. Like with lecture slides, they’re like ‘We’re not going to put them up there because you’ll turn up and you’ll think you’ve got all your lecture slides already and you won’t take notes’. And I kind of want them to trust us and so if I’ve got those lecture notes, I’m not wasting time writing down something that’s already written for me...
I always talk about this with my friends because there are certain lecturers who don’t put things up and we get really annoyed at it because it’s like ‘Now I’ve spent the whole lesson trying to copy your notes and get things down’ – because we have to piece it together like I’ve got the name, they’ve got the date, I’ve got the theory. But what does this all mean?!’” (Third year English interviewee)

Moreover, some students appeared to be avoiding the lectures delivered by certain staff whose lectures added little to their Powerpoint presentation, preferring simply to download the presentation from Blackboard instead:

“Some lecturers will basically have their PowerPoint presentation up there and they’ll pretty much read what’s on it, so was there any point in turning up to the lecture because I can just...”
read it on Blackboard afterwards? So that’s why a lot of students have stopped turning up for lectures because they think ‘Well, I’ll just get the information off Blackboard’ because the lecturers don’t develop it.” (First year English interviewee)

Clearly, academic staff need to take care in how they use Blackboard and other online learning resources in order not to discourage attendance and thereby limit the possibilities of interaction even further. There were, however, some excellent examples of effective use of online resources involving the use of discussion boards to enable virtual discussions to take place between students. This seemed to be most effective when students were left to discuss topics with the tutor only contributing when necessary:

“There’s an online discussion board on medicine and we talk about questions and answers to stuff if people aren’t sure; and if nobody’s really getting the right idea, the module leader will step in and say ‘Look, here’s an explanation’. They’ll give time to let other people talk about it first but if no one’s getting the right idea, they’ll step in and clarify on the online discussion boards.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“I used to look on that from time to time and someone would have posted a question; and they would give students a couple of chances to answer it but then in the end they were really good at replying themselves [by posting] quite detailed and good answers.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“The lecturer opened up a blackboard discussion group which proved very successful and extremely helpful. Even more helpful than the ‘help desk’ (where I have only been once)” (NSS comment, Psychology Student)

One second year Biological Sciences student offered up a few words of caution in a video diary about this mode of interaction after taking part in an online discussion. Although recognising the advantages of having a discussion without the participants actually having to be in the same physical location, the student felt that the conversations often moved too fast and some students tended to contribute more than others:

“They had a discussion board online, which was good and bad. It was good as could be anywhere, but it was bad because as they were being marked on it quite a few people tried to dominate it. It was very quick paced too so often people had moved onto the next topic before they had chance to answer a question on the first one.” (Second year Biological Sciences video diary)

Many students also commented on how useful it was to be able to communicate with their tutors via email but only if they thought they could get a relatively quick response to their queries. The students learned quickly which of their tutors were likely to respond promptly:

“They always say ‘If you have a problem, have a go at doing it yourself but if all else fails you can email me and I’ll get back to you’.” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“You know they’re obviously very dedicated because you look at some of the times they were posting them, like midnight, 1am…” (First year Medicine interviewee)

“There are a couple of guys whose personal tutors aren’t that quick at responding and stuff and they’ve said it’s been a bit of a pain”. (First year English interview)
4 e) Course led social interactions and activities

Relationships fostered in the classroom through teaching methods often lead to students socialising away from the classroom but the research has shown that social events organised by departments are very popular with students. Whilst the research provided very few examples of such events taking place, students universally agreed that they would like to see more. One student, from the MA in Museum Studies, explained how a social event had been arranged at the start of the course and thought it would be very beneficial to have a similar event organised for other courses at the University:

“They had a little social gathering after the first day so we all got to meet each other and the lecturers in a less formal setting, which was really nice. I think it’s a format that works. It was great as there were 70 of us on the course so it was still quite a big course but I think that it really helped and everyone could be themselves. It was just relaxed and a good environment” (AccessAbility Centre interviewee)

Such departmental social events prompted enthusiasm; a third year English student spoke very highly of a professor from the department who agreed to attend a social gathering in the Students’ Union bar as part of the ‘Literary Leicester’ week:

“There was a Literary Leicester thing a couple of weeks ago and [the professor] gave a talk. The English Society all got together in the Scholar and asked [him] to come and have a drink with us. He came along after his talk to talk to us about what his opinions were on various things, and we could ask him questions. That was really nice because it was good for tutors to treat students as colleagues and not just as though it’s a superior/inferior relationship. We’re not little kids anymore and I feel that’s really good” (Third year English interviewee)

The advantages of having course specific clubs and societies (e.g. the English Society) were cited by the students as being another way of developing friendships with their peers and breaking down barriers with academic staff although the opportunities offered by these societies were not always fully exploited or fully thought through:

“There’s the English Society, which quite a lot of people joined. I didn’t join because I couldn’t see the benefits for me; they just seemed to do a pub crawl every now and again and that was it. And I don’t think many of the people who have joined have done anything with the English Society in the end because it was like ‘Oh, another bar crawl...’ Really, is that all you could come up with?” (First year English interviewee)

“The only thing the English department organised was a trip to see King Lear this year, which a lot of people couldn’t do. The timing of it was when we had loads of essays due; we had one due the following day so it was ‘No, it’s just not possible!’” (First year English interviewee)

7. Implications

The department to which a student belongs is a huge influence on the attitudes and expectations of its students and, crucially, on their overall sense of belonging. This suggests that many of the interventions designed to enhance the experience of students at the University, and by implication to increase their sense of belonging, need to be rooted at this level in order to have the greatest impact. It is important here to discriminate between different types of intervention. For example, the qualitative data clearly demonstrates the
importance of curriculum methods, not only for effective learning, but also in helping students develop relationships with their fellow students and the academic staff at the University. In particular, first year students valued the opportunities presented by small group teaching, particularly within seminar group discussions, tutorials or during laboratory work, and welcomed attempts by academic staff to engage them on an individual level. Moreover, there is some evidence that relationships fostered by group teaching activities within the curriculum can lead to more informal group work or seminar discussions between students on academic issues and course work.

Other interventions, for example field trips, whilst having an evident academic benefit, were also regarded as valuable opportunities to develop friendships with other students and, crucially, get to know academic staff on a more equal basis. These fit more closely with those social events and activities organised by departments with the explicit aim of helping students to integrate and belong. For those students not staying in University accommodation, such activities are particularly important, especially where curricular opportunities for socialising are more limited due to fewer contact hours. A third type of intervention, the more formal structures designed to support students directly, such as timetabled help sessions, mentoring and peer-assisted learning schemes, and online discussion groups, were also seen as beneficial in terms of providing help, cementing relationships and aiding communication. Colleges, therefore, might consider mapping the cultures and practices across their constituent departments in order to identify more clearly those practices which most foster their students’ sense of belonging.

If there are differences in the extent to which students feel they belong at university and these are, to a great extent, the result of departmental influence, then some departments might also need to acknowledge that their potential in this respect is more limited. For example, it is evident from the University Life survey that there are important differences between the experiences of students in the Medicine and English departments, possibly resulting from factors such as the physical existence of the Medicine department, the more explicit vocational nature of the Medicine degree, and the stronger extra-curricular bonds that exist between Medicine students. In a broad sense, it may be fair to conclude that English students will never feel the same about their department as Medicine students and that, consequently, their sense of belonging may never be as great. Although the English department might usefully look at practices in Medicine and seek to adapt these or learn from them to the benefit of its own students, these might not be readily adaptable, or even appropriate, to English leaving potential for interventions at a College or University level.

At a more strategic level, there would seem to be a role for Staff Development in facilitating the exchange of good practice in this context between departments and colleges. In the past, Leicester forums such as the Teaching and Assessment Network brought staff together from non-cognate areas of the University and, by exploring common issues from different perspectives, helped to share good practice and disseminate effective ideas and approaches more widely across the institution. The time might be right to reconsider the role of such cross-disciplinary forums, whether at a College or a University level, or possibly both, in facilitating debate and deliberation of these issues with a view to spreading and developing good practice.

8. References


Summary

Students in both the first and third year of study gave many examples of positive experiences with Central Support Services but regardless of which services were used it was a great deal of comfort to students knowing there was someone at the University to talk to with any concerns or issues they may have, academic or otherwise. Even if they had not needed to discuss any problems it was reassuring for them to know that help is available.

Students acknowledged the approachability of staff across the services and were particularly grateful, not only for the accurate advice given, but also for the communication that exists between the members of staff across the services. Students were confident that most central support staff could direct them to the appropriate source of help if they were unsure who to approach and, in some cases, offer to talk to the academic staff on their behalf.

The David Wilson Library was highlighted as being an excellent centrally located recourse providing a great location for independent study but also, very importantly, a meeting place for students outside of timetabled classes to carry out group work. There was, however, a heavy demand on the rooms set aside for group work along with the computing facilities within the library.

2. General Comments and Awareness

The majority of students at the University of Leicester do not need to use the Central Support Services on a regular basis. Those that do, however, are almost universal in their praise of the services offered. A Geology student commented in the National Student Survey about the:

“Fantastic pastoral support [they had received] throughout [their course]” (NSS comment, Geology student)

Although many students have only used the Central Support Services on a few occasions, if at all, it is clear that knowing the services are there for them if they are required is a great source of reassurance throughout their time at the University:

“They are so supportive here at Leicester; you wouldn’t find this back home, the University providing so much support to the students. [At Leicester] you find a person to help with every issue you have; it doesn’t matter what it is, there is someone to help you… I didn’t know how good the support was before I came here, I’d heard that it had got some great feedback from its students, but I didn’t know about the actual support they would provide so when I came here I was like ‘Wow! This is really, really good!’” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student interviewee)

There were occasions when a small number of students seemed uncertain where to go for help with some specific non-course related problems; a first year video diary contributor, for example, talked briefly about some financial concerns she was having and that she was uncertain who to approach. There was evidence, however, of the University raising awareness of the services particularly during induction week and through posters and leaflet distribution (such as the ‘Making Connections’ pamphlets) and consequently the majority of students knew
there was help available for almost any issue they may encounter and they certainly had a good understanding of the support services the University offers:

“I don’t really feel that any of those things apply to me yet although we did have introductory talks when we came so you know there is help available and you know where to go to get that help” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“Everybody’s aware [of the support that is available] and I’ve noticed you go up to the notice boards or in the loos and stuff and there’s posters for things like welfare-based help lines; and little tear off numbers if you need to go ring someone about something” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“Pastoral support is good and made obviously available” (First year undergraduate English student questionnaire respondent)

Students who had used the central support talked mainly about the individual services (see section 2 below) but one area that was appreciated by all the students, regardless of the actual service they used, was the level of communication that exists between the services. Staff at the AccessAbility Centre, for example, ensured that students were directed to someone who can help them if they did not feel they could be of assistance and, very importantly, they would make contact on the students’ behalf. A student who had studied previously at other HE institutions had been very impressed with this level of communication when he needed help with accommodation:

“When you’re at a new institution you don’t necessarily know where to go for help, and you can end up being sent to different people because somebody’s not quite sure. [At Leicester] everybody seemed to know... They didn’t just say ‘Oh, that’s not my job’, they knew ‘That’s not my job, but I think it’s so-and-so’s but I’ll go and get them and find out’... I did have problems because I didn’t have accommodation and a combination of the Students’ Union and [an advisor] in Welfare Support, got together and organised accommodation for me and it was there that day, or the following day; it was done pretty quickly. So I was quite impressed at the two working together because sometimes in the past, I’ve been to a Students’ Union for help and it’s very much an ‘us and them’ situation; whereas this was ‘OK, you go to this person but I’ll ring them for you and they’ll come over and see you here’ (PhD Engineering student interviewee)

Knowing this level of knowledge and communication exists at the University is reassuring for students as they know they can approach any one of the support services if they have a problem and they will be directed to the appropriate service for them.

3. Individual Services

A selection of students were chosen to take part in the research because they are regular users of the AccessAbility Centre and consequently their experience with the AccessAbility Centre was discussed in some depth. Students also talked about their experiences with Student Counselling and Mental Wellbeing, the Student Welfare Service, the Student Development Service and the David Wilson Library.

3.1 AccessAbility Centre

The effectiveness of the support offered by the AccessAbility Centre cannot be over emphasised:
“The Accessibility centre has been excellent in the help and support of students” (NSS Comment, Psychology student)

Without the support and help offered by the AccessAbility Centre some students would have struggled to progress and in certain cases the help offered to students in actually making the transition to study at the University was of paramount importance:

“My transition to higher education becomes easier because I have a lot of support from Accessibility” (Postgraduate Law student interviewee)

Several international students found the services offered by the Centre to be far better than they would have in their own country:

“I think my attitude has changed a little in comparison to in Greece because here they support a lot – like Accessibility and Student Development. And because they are more supportive you’re not stressed as much; and because you’re less stressed you feel more balanced… I’d like to say thank you to Accessibility and Student Development for their help because they do excellent work; I can see the improvement in my English from my assignments from all these hours – and they spent a lot of hours... If I didn’t have help I would fail more assignments or press them for more extensions or transfer to part-time because I am very, very slow. I would struggle more now but I’ve learnt a lot of things and I’m OK. If I didn’t have this support I would be more stressed and I would feel more desperate about what you’re supposed to do. Now I feel more confident” (Postgraduate Law student interviewee)

There were many examples of how the AccessAbility Centre have helped students and a section of quotes showing the variety of issues are given below including examples of specific interventions that help make students’ everyday life a little easier such as the ‘white card system’ they have in place in the library and the tutorials or group work sessions the AccessAbility Centre runs. The effective level of communication that exists with academic staff and other central support services was also mentioned and the words of encouragement they offer to students at certain times of the year were appreciated:

“I don’t know if you’ve come across this - but they give you a white card and that just shows the library staff that you need some help, you don’t need to go into explaining why you need to use the lift or why you need books carrying for you, or why you need a trolley. If you’ve got a white card, you get help but without going into anything, which makes it a really good and really simple idea” (PhD Engineering student interviewee)

“They often run tutorials or group sessions to teach learning methods, revision methods, things like that, which a dyslexic person would find more difficult to do without that. A lot of what they go over I’ve fortunately had the blessing of covering, but I can see the benefits that it provides to everybody else. For example, a friend of mine in the Medical School – who has only since he’s come to Medicine been diagnosed as dyslexic… the Accessibility Centre for him is just like the Holy Grail. They’ve helped him so much and there’s lots of things they offer: that along with the Disabled Students’ Allowance that allows you to access their oral dictation programmes, laptops - all those other resources – that makes it good” (First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“I talked to the Accessibility Centre and they’re fantastic and have helped me with lots of stuff. There are a few people there that said a few people in the Med School don’t understand dyslexia; they haven’t been taught what it means and so it’s quite obvious for them to presume the typical ‘laziness’ or ‘excuse’ reasons for it, which for me having had it all my life I know isn’t true... The Med School is a very closed off environment compared to
the rest of the University: there are only a few individuals in there who understand about dyslexia, I think” (First year undergraduate Medicine interviewee)

“They’ve been very supportive, they send emails round saying things like 'Good luck in your exams’” (PhD Engineering student interviewee)

Another student described how effective having a single person in charge of the AccessAbility Centre is compared to other institutions:

“Some of my other choices didn’t have a single person in charge of the disabilities centre so it’s not as easy because the departments don’t always work together; so like accommodation or finance... One university I looked at, they said 'Talk to the other one’ and then when you do talk to the other one, they say ‘Go back and talk to the first one you talked to!’” (First year undergraduate Interdisciplinary Science student interviewee)

One student liked the fact that they allowed you to ‘drop in’ and be able to speak to someone straight away:

“Being able to nip in with queries and just be able to see somebody; I think that’s great... I’m not the most organised of people so sometimes it may be last minute, but they’re always really helpful” (Postgraduate Museum Studies student interviewee)

3.2 Student Counselling and Mental Wellbeing

Students welcomed having someone to talk to about issues they encountered that were part of university life but not relevant to their academic studies; a couple of students recognised that the Student Counselling and Mental Wellbeing Service provides this opportunity:

"With my personal tutor I only speak to her about academic issues. For my first two years, when I had any non-academic issues, I often went to the student counselling service, just to get some emotional support. I kind of thought that I shouldn’t muddy the waters, if that makes sense? I should keep the academic and the emotional side separate because if I didn’t do that, things might get a bit confused... I was made aware of the Counselling service when I arrived in Leicester; they gave me a welcome pack and it was all in there” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

One student in particular explained how she had struggled with the social aspects of university life and how having someone to talk to in Counselling had really helped her:

“I did use the Counselling service but I wouldn’t have used my tutor as an initial route to that because I felt that it was a separate thing that was related to the academic side of university... I remember seeing a sign up... I just felt at the time that I wasn’t completely happy at the University so that’s why I went to see them about it; it’s a really useful service. It was particularly to do with the fact that I don’t drink and I was going out with my friends but feeling a lot of peer pressure to drink... they reassured me that it wasn’t me that had the problem. It’s not them with a problem either, it’s just a kind of mismatch of priorities... Earlier conversations with friends had helped as well, but counselling in the first year definitely helped to make that concrete for me and make me realise it’s not my fault. And to hear about other students in that same situation because I honestly thought it was just me... the Counselling service were really useful in the first year” (Third year undergraduate Media and Communications student interviewee)

3.3 Student Welfare Service
Students’ comments about the Welfare Service were limited to examples of the excellent help they received. Several members of staff were praised for their help with financial concerns:

“Prior to coming here I was getting stressed out about money, about the whole student loans thing. I remember getting a letter from Student Loans saying ‘You’re not getting any money through us’ and I really freaked out... I’d made several phone calls to Student Welfare and [the advisor] was really helpful and she told me what my options were if I didn’t end up getting money. It was really nice to talk to her and it all worked out fine... I hope people realise just how much she does for students... it made a very positive impression to start university with, which I think is crucial to any student’s experience”
(First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“I’ve gone to the Welfare office in the Students’ Union because I was really struggling financially and I didn’t know where to go; I just rang up the Welfare number and they said ‘Come in and speak to us’. So that’s only been about finance but I know they’re there if I need them for other things – like if there was a discrepancy with a mark or something, they would speak to the tutors”
(Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“My Dad didn’t send the money through because he had a problem... So I rang up [Welfare] and spoke to the lady in charge of the financial side and it was a really relaxed, casual conversation... they were really good and sympathetic about it; they worked out what my problem was and they were just like ‘Look, it happens’... and that was fine; they gave me a one-week extension and I paid”
(First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

None of the students had anything negative to report about the Welfare Service although a first year Medical Student who needed to approach Welfare for help with accommodation thought it would be useful to provide some literature to guide students as the processes involved in applying and living in accommodation can be confusing:

“Perhaps just a little booklet that says be careful who you choose your house with, you’re going to be with them for a year; make sure you start looking soon. And then also maybe a list of average prices so people know if they’re being ripped off”
(First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

### 3.4  The David Wilson Library and Student Development

Students acknowledged the relatively new David Wilson Library and considered it to be a great resource; especially the students who had used or seen other University libraries.

“I particularly like this library; it’s a great place to come and study. I bring my laptop in and plug into the network and just get all your lectures and everything there”
(First year undergraduate Medicine student interviewee)

“I’ve experienced another university’s library, but this is above and beyond that”
(Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“The library & its resources are unfaultable! There is plenty of quiet space to work, & much help available when required”
(NSS comment, Psychology student)

One student talked about how important it was to have somewhere that they could go and study:
“The library is where I feel most comfortable because it’s got a restaurant, it’s got computer rooms; it’s basically got everything you need to study. I do most of my work here because I’m one of those annoying people that cannot concentrate at home so I spend quite a lot of time in here doing essays and stuff” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Giving students the opportunity to work together is an important way of encouraging students to interact with each other and develop relationships that are crucial to a positive university experience. Having spaces to work together away from timetabled contact time is important and the library provides rooms that students can book for group work sessions. The value of these rooms was certainly recognised:

“There are rooms at the side that you can hire for one or two hours, they’re brilliant but there’s not enough of them” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“The library has been really useful for this project as there are group rooms where we could get together and use a computer” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student video diary entry)

The only real issue was that there were not enough of these rooms available and consequently students often tended to talk in the quiet study areas of the library.

There were only two other problems mentioned by the students. Firstly, there was a consensus that there were insufficient computers available to students who did not like using computers in other buildings as an alternative:

“There’s a lack of computers: trying to find a computer in the afternoon, you can’t and the trouble with using computers in other buildings is that you can go in and settle down for half an hour, and a tutor will come in and say ‘I’ve got a class now. I need all these computers’” (First year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Some students (especially third year students) expressed annoyance that often these computers were used for non-academic purposes with one student saying they would like to see Facebook banned from the library:

“There’s not enough computers: if you come in before three o’clock – because that’s when people tend to go home – you’re hard pushed to find a computer anywhere. And it’s all people Internet shopping, watching videos on YouTube, or on Facebook. And because I’m in the SSC, I have said they should ban Facebook in the library: they said ‘We can’t do that, we want the library to be a ‘homely’ place where people feel they can come’. I said ‘That’s fair enough but it’s a place of study. And when I go to the desk downstairs, they give me a list and say ‘Find somewhere else on the campus’. Why can’t the people who want to go on Facebook find somewhere else on campus?” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

This is a difficult issue, however, as allowing students to interact physically and virtually is central to their university experience.

Secondly, the students expressed concern at the lack of certain key texts at key times during their course:

“Right now it’s dissertation and exams time so you’re not getting hold of a book. And even if you put it on hold, they’ve got seven days to return it, so that’s seven days plus some people would be able to cover the fines so they keep it, but who wouldn’t? If I knew I was
going to benefit from having that book for a couple more days by getting a first, then you’d probably think ‘Well, it’ll cost me £5 to write this essay. But that drives me insane’” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

“The library is quite well stocked in most modules, although wanting in my Russian and French literature course... But that’s alright; you can’t expect them to cover everything” (Third year undergraduate English student interviewee)

Finally a couple of students gave examples of the help provided by the Student Development Zone:

“The support services like Student Development are very helpful and support a lot. I think they do excellent work... If I didn’t have help I would fail more assignments; I would be more stressed and I would feel more desperate about what you’re supposed to do. Now I feel more confident” (Post Graduate Law student interviewee)

“For my first assignment in every subject, I didn’t do that well; I didn’t actually know what they expected from it. We were told to write a descriptive essay but I didn’t have experience of writing that type of essay. I went to Student Development here and I just picked up some leaflets and went through them; and they were really helpful” (First year undergraduate Biological Sciences student interviewee)
Student Retention and Success Project
Outcome Briefing 3: Managing Expectations

4. Background

The University of Leicester Student Retention and Success Project (funded by HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation) has been investigating ‘Belonging’ and ‘Intimacy’ as themes that have enabled the University of Leicester to be successful in retaining students and in facilitating their success and satisfaction (the University has a high retention rate and extremely high scores in the National Student Survey for satisfaction). Initial investigation of these phenomena, derived from feedback, points to the students ‘feeling a belonging to the institution/department’ and the importance of ‘the intimacy of the institution and its staff’. The project has followed up these themes quantitatively and qualitatively in order to examine fully what students have acknowledged as actually making a difference.

The more specific objectives of the project are:

- the identification of practices that make a difference in terms of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Intimacy’
- an understanding of how such practices impact on different selected groups of students (across courses and departments; potential and actual withdrawers; students with disabilities etc.);
- recommendations and a model of practice for the institution and the sector;
- an integrated data set related to retention and methodology for continued analysis;
- dissemination activities including conferences, papers and final report.

Research methods so far have included:

8. Examination of existing quantitative data held centrally at the University, including National Student Survey (NSS) 2009 data.
9. A survey (University Life Survey) of about c500 first year students from Biological Sciences (149 students), Medicine (215) and English (132) designed to measure their view of life at university and their sense of belonging.
10. In-depth qualitative interviews with a selection of students completing the above questionnaire.
11. In-depth qualitative interviews with a selection of students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties who had used the University’s AccessAbility Centre.
12. A survey of c1200 students who had withdrawn from the University in the academic years 2007-08 and 2008-09 asking about the reasons for their withdrawal and the support and advice offered whilst they were in the process of doing so, with responses being received from over 100.
13. Examination of reflective video diaries completed by first and second year Biological Sciences students.
14. A survey (University Life Survey) of c200 final year students from Biological Sciences and English along similar lines to 2. above.

5. Findings

2 a) University Life Survey
The Expectations scale within the University Life Survey consists of a set of items measuring the extent to which students feel they are happy with their choice of university and whether life at university fits their expectations. In the 1st Year survey the scale comprises four items:

- I think I chose the right university for me
- Overall, I am happy with my choice of course
- I have thought about leaving the course / university
- The course fits my expectations

For the 3rd Year survey, the scale was expanded to include an additional item in order to gauge students’ feelings about university having been here for nearly three years:

- University life is exactly how I thought it would be

As mentioned in Outcome Briefing 2: Central Services, there are strong positive correlations between all three scales (Expectations, Attitudes, and Sense of Belonging) as a whole. Further analysis on the relationship between the four (or five, in the case of 3rd Year students) individual items of the Expectations scale and the three scales reveals a very significant correlation. This indicates that there is a strong relationship between students’ expectations and their attitudes (covering areas including: study skills; subject background; course timetable/workload; dealing with problems and seeking help; staff approachability; and support of family and friends) and sense of belonging.

This relationship was further explored by examining the scores on the Attitudes and Sense of Belonging scales of students who had high scores on the Expectations scale (i.e. those who felt that their expectations had been met) and those who had low scores (i.e. those who felt that their expectations had not been met). This revealed that students with low scores also scored significantly lower on both the Attitudes and the Sense of Belonging scales with the reverse being true for students with high scores. This suggests that there is a direct relationship between whether or not students feel that their expectations of university life are being met and both their attitudes to, and sense of belonging within, the institution.

This presents the institution with a challenge since, although prospective students’ expectations are to a large extent outside the control of the University itself, they clearly have a significant impact on students’ experience whilst here and may contribute, directly or indirectly, to their retention and success. Having said this, it has to be acknowledged that there are some factors over which the University can exercise control and which might, as a consequence, positively influence students’ expectations and experiences. More specifically, the institution puts considerable efforts into activities which can be regarded as affecting, in some measure, the views that prospective students develop about higher education generally and the University, departments, disciplines and programmes in particular. These activities include:

- activities designed to widen participation including outreach in the primary and secondary sector, and residential schools;
- prospectuses and other information resources;
- websites and online tools to engage prospective students;
- open days and related campus-based activities;
- Student Ambassadors and similar efforts to involve current students in reaching out to prospective students, their parents and others.
It is clear from the above, by no means exhaustive, list that the University is already engaging many prospective students in considering their futures within HE and, consequently, in a real sense is mediating their expectations. Moreover, the evidence from the University Life Survey suggests that students’ expectations are crucial in informing and influencing their later experience and, in particular, their sense of belonging to and integration within the institution. This, therefore, bestows a greater importance on such pre-entry engagement activities by emphasizing their educational and developmental impact and potential rather than their effects in terms of marketing and recruitment alone.

2 b) Early Withdrawal Survey

This survey investigated the reasons why students left their courses early by asking them the extent to which various factors influenced their decision to withdraw, focusing on three key areas:

4. being prepared for/expectations of HE;
5. academic study;
6. personal reasons.

The most important factors considered to be a major influence were:

- Choosing the wrong course (28%)
- Experiencing a period of illness or personal difficulty (19%)
- Course failing to meet expectations (17%)
- Poor academic support from their department (16%)
- Poor feedback about their academic work (15%)
- Difficulty balancing their academic work with family/personal pressures (14%)
- Poor personal support from their department (14%)

This indicates that two of the top three reasons for early withdrawal (Choosing the wrong course and Course failing to meet expectations) were related to students’ expectations, suggesting that, for whatever reason, some students are disappointed by their higher education experience either through making poor choices or having unfulfilled expectations. The first of these (Choosing the wrong course) is clearly a wider issue than can be addressed solely by the University and has implications for educational and career advice provided by others including schools, colleges and public agencies. The latter (Course failing to meet expectations) is more wholly within the control of the institution and has implications for, inter alia, course and institutional information, marketing and publicity, recruitment, outreach and pre-entry engagement.

Figure 1. below shows the full range of options presented to early withdrawers in this part of the questionnaire with the rates of different responses.

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It is clear from the above that a significant proportion of the cohort (at least 30% indicating that the factor had some influence on their decision to leave) were also disappointed by aspects of their teaching and learning experience, their experience of university life, and their overall preparation for study at this level, particularly given the context that 90% of survey respondents indicated that the University of Leicester was their first choice. Some ex-students gave more details on the source of their disappointment, for example the level of knowledge required to succeed on the course:

‘The course was poorly marketed. It stated that there was a minimal amount of maths and that this would be gone through very slowly but it was rushed and complicated. Many people had previously done maths A level and understood the maths and could apply the economics to it so I was left behind with little help.’ (Economics undergraduate student)

‘I was quite clearly unprepared for study on a foundation year in Engineering, this was evident in a matter of days of commencing the course. I believe I was accepted onto the course when I shouldn’t have been something I could tell that my tutor agreed with me when I went to discuss withdrawing from study.’ (Engineering undergraduate student)

For others it was the result of the course not living up to its promises in terms of content:

‘I left for two reasons: 1. Towards the end of the first term I got an email telling us that the advertised course for the following term had been cancelled because the professor would be taking study leave and instead of it we would be getting a course on the Reformation which did not interest me. 2. I thought that I would be able to choose projects that were of interest to me rather than have projects set by the lecturers that were of interest to them’. It was obvious that leaving was the best option... I feel that the department of ............. had no conception that people paying their own money to undertake an advertised course of study
would expect the course provided to be the same as that advertised.’ (English Local History taught postgraduate student)

Whilst acknowledging that these may only have been contributory factors and that there is a limit to the extent to which any institution can influence the expectations of its prospective students, the degree of mismatch between the offer and the subsequent reality for some students is concerning, particularly in the context of the central and departmental resources invested in marketing and publicity by the institution.

11. Implications
The evidence for the strong link between students’ expectations, the quality of their experience at university, and their overall sense of belonging suggests the needs for a sophisticated approach to some of the University’s marketing and recruitment activities. In broad terms this means reviewing the full range of institutional activities designed to encourage prospective students to consider studying at Leicester in order to ensure that they deliver transparent and consistent messages about the reality of the experience. In an increasingly competitive higher education marketplace this presents many challenges but the advent of a student-led funding regime makes this a more, not less, urgent priority as this will place a premium on institutions’ being able to demonstrate good retention rates and successful students.

In practical terms, this will mean ensuring that institutional marketing communications (online and paper-based) contain messages that reflect the general student experience in a realistic and meaningful way. Similarly, outreach activities need to be clear about the challenges, as well as the rewards and benefits, of continuing into higher education and the more specific aspects of studying at Leicester. Again, this will place a greater emphasis on liaison work with schools and colleges particularly in areas with low rates of entry into higher education, where the social capital of many prospective students may be less influential. Open days of various kinds that bring visitors onto campus provide further opportunities for honing and clarifying the messages that are given to prospective students and the employment of Student Ambassadors, being closer to the reality of the student experience, in an information and advice role is crucial.

The development of the government’s Key Information Sets (KIS), providing basic information about courses and institutions to enable prospective students to compare these quickly and simply, presents a challenge and an opportunity. The risk with the KISs is that they will become shorthand for everything that a prospective student needs to know about a course or institution and lead them to ignore other evidence, possibly including actually visiting an institution. Information that is publicly endorsed in this way, and is available on official websites such as UCAS, can assume an authority that belies its actual validity. Whilst it may represent an important first step for a student, it needs to be complemented by other research if it is to be of any real value. The University might begin to investigate how this value can be supplied through the innovative use of links from the KIS to more experiential and explanatory material that provides a richer and fuller picture of the challenges and rewards of studying at Leicester.

Student Retention and Success Project
Outcome Briefing 4: Personal Tutors and Staff Relationships
6. Background

The University of Leicester Student Retention and Success Project (funded by HEFCE and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation) has been investigating ‘Belonging’ and ‘Intimacy’ as themes that have enabled the University of Leicester to be successful in retaining students and in facilitating their success and satisfaction (the University has a high retention rate and extremely high scores in the National Student Survey for satisfaction). Initial investigation of these phenomena, derived from feedback, points to the students ‘feeling a belonging to the institution/department’ and the importance of ‘the intimacy of the institution and its staff’.

The project has followed up these themes quantitatively and qualitatively in order to examine fully what students have acknowledged as actually making a difference.

The more specific objectives of the project are:

- the identification of practices that make a difference in terms of ‘Belonging’ and ‘Intimacy’
- an understanding of how such practices impact on different selected groups of students (across courses and departments; potential and actual withdrawers; students with disabilities etc.);
- recommendations and a model of practice for the institution and the sector;
- an integrated data set related to retention and methodology for continued analysis;
- dissemination activities including conferences, papers and final report.

Research methods so far have included:

15. Examination of existing quantitative data held centrally at the University, including National Student Survey (NSS) 2009 data.
16. A survey (University Life Survey) of about c500 first year students from Biological Sciences (149 students), Medicine (215) and English (132) designed to measure their view of life at university and their sense of belonging.
17. In-depth qualitative interviews with a selection of students completing the above questionnaire.
18. In-depth qualitative interviews with a selection of students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties who had used the University’s AccessAbility Centre.
19. A survey of c1200 students who had withdrawn from the University in the academic years 2007-08 and 2008-09 asking about the reasons for their withdrawal and the support and advice offered whilst they were in the process of doing so, with responses being received from over 100.
20. Examination of reflective video diaries completed by first and second year Biological Sciences students.
21. A survey (University Life Survey) of c200 final year students from Biological Sciences and English along similar lines to 2. above.

7. Findings

2a) University Life Survey

The University Life Survey consists of a set of 20 items divided into three scales covering Attitudes, Expectations and overall Sense of Belonging. Four of these items gauge how students perceive staff and their relationships with them and are as follows:
e) **Importance of relationship with personal tutor on a scale of 1 (Very important) to 7 (No importance)**

f) **‘There is at least one lecturer (or other person) at the University I can talk to if I have a problem’ (Sense of Belonging scale)**

h) **‘The academic staff seem approachable’ (Attitudes scale)**

In order to measure the impact of students’ relationships with staff on the three scales, responses to each of the four individual items above were divided into two discrete groups according to whether they scored either high (from one standard deviation (SD) above the mean to 7 [maximum]) or low (from one standard deviation below the mean to 1 [minimum]). This was carried out for students in both the 1st Year and 3rd Year surveys and further analysed to identify any impact of these ratings on their overall scores on the Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scales.

The impact of each of the items for the two different year groups is described below.

**a) Importance of relationship with personal tutor**

The analysis shows that, for 1st Years, there were no differences in attitudes or expectations scores but a significant difference in scores on sense of belonging, whilst, for 3rd Year students, no differences were found on any of the three scales. This indicates that 1st Year students who rate their relationship with their personal tutor as being of high importance exhibit a lower sense of belonging to the institution than those who rate their relationship of low importance, although their expectations and attitudes are unaffected. This may be because students who already exhibit a high sense of belonging to the institution for whatever reason, consequently place less importance on their relationship with their personal tutor as a means of developing this, and vice versa. This effect is not apparent in 3rd Year students.

![Figure 1. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 1st Years rating the importance of their personal tutor as high or low](image-url)
Figure 2. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 3rd Years rating the importance of their personal tutor as high or low.

b) There is at least one lecturer (or other person) at the University I can talk to if I have a problem

The analysis shows significant differences in scores on all three scales among both 1st Year and 3rd Year students indicating that whether or not students feel that they have someone to talk to about problems is a significant influence on their attitudes, expectations and sense of belonging.

Figure 3. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 1st Years scoring high or low on whether there is someone they can talk to if they have a problem
Figure 4. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 3rd Years scoring high or low on whether there is someone they can talk to if they have a problem

c) I know where/who to go to for help if I am having problems with coursework

The analysis shows significant differences on all three scales among both 1st and 3rd Year students indicating that whether or not students feel that they know where/who to go to for help if they are having problems with coursework is a significant influence on their attitudes, expectations, and sense of belonging.

Figure 5. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 1st Years scoring high or low on knowing where/who to go to for help with coursework problems
d) The academic staff seem approachable

The analysis shows significant differences in scores on all three scales among both 1st Year and 3rd Year students indicating that whether or not students feel staff to be approachable is a significant influence on their expectations, attitudes and sense of belonging.

Figure 6. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 3rd Years scoring high or low on knowing where/who to go to for help with coursework problems

Figure 7. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 1st Years scoring high or low on whether academic staff seem approachable
Figure 8. Mean Attitudes, Expectations and Sense of Belonging scores for 3rd Years scoring high or low on whether academic staff seem approachable
2 b) Early Withdrawal Survey
This survey investigated the reasons why students left their courses early focusing on three key areas:

7. being prepared for/expectations of HE;
8. academic study;
9. personal reasons.

Findings from the survey on the first of these areas (being prepared for/expectations of HE) indicated that 34% (n=113) felt that being ‘disappointed by the amount of teaching and contact hours with staff provided on my course’ was at least of some influence in their decision to leave (a major influence for 12%). Furthermore, findings in the second area (academic reasons) indicated that 43% felt that not being given ‘helpful academic support by my department’ was at least of some influence in their decision to leave (a major influence for 16%), and 25% of respondents regarded the fact that they did not know ‘where to go to seek academic help or advice’ was of some influence (a major influence for 6%).

In terms of their personal reasons for leaving, 33% felt that not being given ‘helpful personal support by my department’ was of some influence in their decision to leave (a major influence for 14%), whilst 28% indicated that they were influenced by not knowing ‘where to seek personal help or advice’ (a major influence for 8%).

Looking at the above findings together suggests that some students (at least about 1 in 6 or 7 on the basis of this survey) at some stage seek either academic or personal support from their department and, for whatever reason, do not receive this. In addition, there are smaller numbers who do not know where to go for such help or advice. The personal tutor system at Leicester is designed to provide a first port of call for students in difficulties with referral then possible to sources of more specific support (largely, although not exclusively, provided by the Student Support and Development Service). Clearly in some cases this is not happening and there may be a link between this perceived shortcoming and some students’ professed disappointment at the provision of staff teaching and contact hours; if this is low, then it is no surprise that students feel less engagement overall with departmental staff and, possibly, their personal tutor.

The survey also sought comments from respondents about their reasons for leaving early. Nearly half of the respondents chose to do so and Figure 7. below indicates the areas most frequently referred to in these.

**Figure 7: Comments from early leavers about their experiences and their reasons for leaving before completing the course (n=55)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor support from tutors/academic staff</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course was misrepresented</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrew due to personal reasons</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful support from University staff</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was not ready for University</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was unemployable</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t like the course</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t enjoy learning</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wasn’t living in the city</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had personal circumstances</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a personal problem</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had time commitments</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was agained</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The largest single area of concern revealed by the comments is ‘Poor support from tutors and academic staff’, cited by 27% of those making comments. This is balanced to some extent by the 15% who felt that they did receive ‘helpful support from University staff’, although this was not necessarily from within the department.

The survey also reveals that the most common source of advice consulted by students about their academic or personal difficulties, or guidance in their decision to leave, was personal tutors (70% consulted these) with smaller proportions also seeking help from others within the department or faculty as Figure 8. below indicates.

**Figure 8: Advice sources consulted by students (n=113)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Tutor</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Academic Staff</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Support Services</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Administrator / Secretary</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Administrator</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman’s Common Health Centre</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ Union</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplaincy</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wardens and Sub-Wardens</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This suggests that most students understand that the personal tutor system is intended to be the primary source of help for students and should, in most cases, be their first resort when in difficulty. The fact that a smaller although significant number of students also consult others within the academic arena might be seen either as a signal that the personal tutor system is not completely effective or as a positive indication that there are others willing to offer help.

Figure 9. below indicates students’ views on whether or not the various sources of help they consulted were helpful to them. It can clearly be seen that, whereas family and friends were almost universally valued for their helpfulness, the ratings for personal tutors were less positive, with just over half (57%) of students who had consulted their personal tutor finding the encounter helpful and over a third (35%) unhelpful. These ratings are less positive than for any of the other potential institutional sources of help (other academic staff, central support services, and department administrator/secretary) used by students, although the numbers in these cases are much lower so should be treated with some caution.
Individual comments from respondents give a picture of some of the problems that students faced when seeking help from personal tutors, including those arising from their lack of awareness of who their personal tutor actually was (reflected in a similar lack of awareness on the part of the tutor) and difficulties in contacting them:

‘I feel that university life was very much isolated. I felt that I couldn’t gain help or support with my work with a lecturer without using email. I felt that my course was unbelievably impersonal and I found it difficult to speak in person with someone about my work. I feel that email was far too commonly used as a method of communication. When I went to withdraw I was told to speak to my personal tutor. I had no idea who he/she was. We had never been introduced and this was 8 weeks into the course. He had no idea who I was either.’ (Psychology undergraduate student)

‘We had no personal tutor meetings and when I tried to discuss issues my personal tutor told me they were busy. This made me feel very helpless and stuck in a bad situation. My personal tutor only replied after I contacted the head of department.’ (Politics undergraduate student)

Some postgraduate students encountered similar difficulties with their supervisors:

‘I did not want to leave but my research tutor was not supportive enough. He failed me twice even when I appealed. He was very discriminatory. He never agreed to help me. He said Masters’ students do not need help so I was working without help all by myself. I felt that I should have been given help on a one to one basis by the personal tutor who marked my research project for the first time instead of being rejected to work by myself.’ (Social Work taught postgraduate student)
‘If / when I wrote to my supervisor he wouldn't always respond, especially at the end. Not great when you're doing a PhD 100 miles away and have a family.’ (Research postgraduate student)

By contrast, those students who reported a better relationship with academic staff often found the support and help provided to be useful:

‘In deciding what course to take my supervisor was patient, available and extremely helpful. My head of department also offered advice, although to a lesser extent. Once I had decided to transfer to my second year the post graduate secretary gave me advice and assistance on the process which was extremely helpful. Overall my experience of support staff is extremely positive.’ (History research postgraduate student)

‘I enjoyed the work and it was a difficult decision to leave, but a personal one. My tutor did everything she could to make things easy for me.’ (Cardiology research postgraduate student)

12. Implications

Both the surveys indicate the crucial importance of personal tutors and the relationships that students establish with them. In the first instance, the University Life Survey indicates that personal tutors play a key role in helping students to establish their sense of belonging within the institution. Indeed, the evidence suggests that students with a low sense of belonging to the institution rate the importance of their relationship with their personal tutor more highly than students with a greater sense of belonging. More generally, their feeling that staff are ‘approachable’, that they know who/where to go if they are having problems with coursework, and that there is someone that they can go to if they have a problem also impacts on their attitudes, expectations and sense of belonging. In the second instance, the Early Withdrawals Survey, the evidence points to the influence of the student-personal tutor relationship on whether or not a student remains on their course. This seems to happen in two ways: firstly, the lack of an effective relationship, as evidenced by students’ not receiving helpful academic or personal support from within their departments, is cited by many students as one of the primary reasons for their withdrawal; secondly, in attempting to resolve their problems, many students seemed to seek help in the first instance from their personal tutors, but subsequently found this to be less than satisfactory. This may then be a contributory factor in their decision to leave.

The University’s review of the personal tutor system, examining the perspectives of both staff and students on its operation and effectiveness, is, in part, an outcome of the Student Retention and Success project and is timely. It is important that the institution investigates how this system works in practice as the evidence, from both these surveys, is that it is crucial to the sense of belonging of many students but that its impact is patchy. In other words, where it works well it makes a major contribution to students’ general integration into the University and, at the individual level, it can make the difference between a student’s leaving their course and choosing to stick with it. In this respect, it is important to ensure consistency across the institution so that all students can be confident of the level of academic and personal support available to them; the demand for this is likely to grow, rather than diminish, with the imminent post-Browne changes to the funding regime. Different cultures prevail across different departments and, whilst it is understandable and even desirable that this is so, these variations must not be allowed to undermine students’ legitimate expectations in terms of appropriate support and advice.
The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice in HE might provide a useful starting point for addressing some of these issues. As all new academic staff are now required to take the qualification, consideration should be given to including the role of the personal tutor, and the particular skills and attributes that this role demands, within the curriculum. Although not all academic staff will take on the responsibility of being a personal tutor, there is a strong argument for developing these skills more widely within the academic body. The University Life Survey identified the connection between students’ attitudes, expectations and sense of belonging and their perception that staff were approachable. The inclusion of appropriate elements within the training of new academic staff to reflect the importance of ‘staff approachability’ as a factor in helping students integrate into the University would explicitly signify that this issue had been acknowledged and was being addressed.

Highlighting the role of the personal tutor, and of other departmental academic and non-academic staff, in helping students to feel a sense of belonging with the institution has more far-reaching implications. Clearly, personal tutors, and other academics, might have considerable expertise in dealing with academic matters but rather less so in handling any personal and related problems that students might bring to them. The findings of the Early Withdrawal Survey, revealing that in relation to students’ personal reasons for leaving early, 33% felt that not being given ‘helpful personal support by my department’ was of some influence in their decision to leave whilst 28% indicated that they were influenced by not knowing ‘where to seek personal help or advice’, indicate that this is an area for attention. Personal tutors might feel, with justification, ill-equipped to respond to such enquiries and therefore reluctant to get involved. The University has specialist resources available to help such students (largely those provided by the Student Support and Development Service), however, and personal tutors, and others, have a crucial part to play in acting as referrers or gatekeepers to these. Once again, however, it should not be assumed that this role is either comfortable or straightforward and staff involved in providing such signposting need guidance, support and training to help them do so effectively.
Appendix 3

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER
Code of Practice for the University’s Personal Tutor System

This year the main focus of the group has been the Personal Tutor Project, a collaboration between students, staff and the Education Unit of the Students’ Union. The project has been taking place throughout the year and has involved gathering both quantitative and qualitative data on the functioning of the personal tutor system across the University.

The ultimate aim of the project was to produce a code of practice for our personal tutor system. The full report is due to be produced at the beginning of July however in order to enable the Code of Practice to be in operation for next academic year we are presenting the project at this meeting together with the Code of Practice that has emerged. Three student members of the team will present an outline of the findings of the research which have informed production of the Code of Practice.

The Code of Practice presented here, covers only campus based students. It is clear that a different Code of Practice will be required for distance learning. The research did attempt to include distance learning students but had a poor response from this group as you will hear. The School of Management is working on enhancing personal support for distance learning students and the Personal Tutor Working Group will work with them building on the outcomes of our research.

It is not appropriate to make the point in the Code of Practice that the status of the personal tutor needs to be such that work in this area has to be properly counted as part of a member of staff’s work load and good work in this area needs to be included in criteria for reward and recognition in the promotion process.

This Code of Practice provides more detail than the 2005 guidelines on which it is based. It should be in place for the 2011-12 session, though it is clear that there will be a need for an implementation period during which departments can adjust their current practices. A copy of this Code of Practice should be easily accessible on the University website.

Principles

1) Each department must have in place systems for supporting undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in relation to:
   • Regular personal support
   • Crisis support
   • Reflection on their own skills and performance

2) The responsibility for initiating contact in respect of regular personal support lies with the department. The responsibility for initiating contact in respect of crisis support or
additional requests for guidance lies with the student, but on the understanding that clear arrangements are in place to facilitate that contact. Students and staff have equal responsibility to develop and maintain the relationship.

3) Personal tutors must be supported by the provision of induction of new staff into the role, and by appropriate on-going staff development, including regular briefings by their department in relation to the content of this code of practice. Training must include information regarding other University services, the processes for referral of students for further assistance and how to be an effective personal tutor.

**Operation of the Personal Tutor System**

4) Each student must be allocated a personal tutor at the start of their programme. The department must notify the student and the University Registry of this allocation, and of any subsequent alterations. The department must also publish in the departmental handbook the procedures whereby students can apply to change their tutor.

5) The allocation of staff to the role of personal tutor can be undertaken in one of the following ways:

- an approximately equal distribution of students across all the department’s academic staff

- the distribution of students across some of the department’s academic staff (excluding, for example, Admissions Tutors and the Examinations Officer—in this scheme, personal tutoring would be factored into the department’s system of allocating duties and managing staff time)

- the identification of programme leaders as personal tutors (this is a strategy which is particularly applicable to small taught postgraduate programmes but might be useful for small undergraduate programmes or small departments generally. Large student allocations to individual tutors should be avoided)

Tutors must have knowledge and understanding of the student’s programme of study. The number of tutees allocated to an individual tutor should be kept to a minimum. Tutors should not be allocated so many tutees that they cannot have meaningful individual contact with each of their personal tutees. Normally, this number should not exceed 30 students per tutor.

6) Students should be allocated a personal tutor within the first week of their course.

7) The personal tutor should:

- establish initial contact with their new students through group or individual meetings at the beginning of the academic year, ideally within the two weeks; this should be regarded as the single most important element in establishing the basis of a sound tutor: tutee relationship

- once a term, arrange a one-to-one meetings with each tutee. The publishing of ‘office hours’ during which a tutor is available (such
arrangements to be included in departmental handbooks and displayed on notice boards) whilst good practice, should not be seen as negating the need for arranging one-to-one meetings

• issue written invitations to attend such meetings, with a reminder that tutors are in a position to advise and guide at all times, not just when difficulties occur (‘written’ here includes e-mail and/or communication via Blackboard)

• attend meetings, where required, in any circumstances where the performance of their tutees is being discussed (progress committees, boards of examiners, special cases committees, etc.)

• wherever circumstances allow, respond positively to requests from tutees for assistance in understanding departmental or University procedures, and engage in personal advocacy to support students

• refer students to the University’s central support systems as necessary

• undertake such other duties relating to student support as may be determined by the Head of Department.

• keep a record of each meeting with tutees.

8) Students should:

• once a term at least, make contact with their tutor (‘contact’ here includes face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations and/or e-mail, as appropriate).

• Seek timely advice from their tutor, when faced with academic, course assessment or personal issues that require support

9) Departments should:

• circulate annually to students and tutors guidance describing the purpose of the personal tutor system (previously produced by the Personal Tutor Working Group in collaboration with the Students’ Union; this might be incorporated into the course handbook)

• ensure that relevant information concerning personal tutees (academic, personal) is passed on to tutors in a timely manner

• have an agreed and published arrangement for dealing with students requiring immediate advice or assistance; this means that when a personal tutor is not available, there should be a clear default position. Such arrangements for crisis support should be clearly publicised to students, academic and administrative staff.
ensure that if a personal tutor becomes unavailable for any reason that a new allocation is made and that this is advised to student and Registry Monitoring

10) The operation of the personal tutor system should be a regular agenda item for student/staff committees and departmental staff meetings. In order to monitor the functioning of the system, departments may develop other methods of surveying student satisfaction with their personal tutors.

Departments should report annually to their College Academic Committee as part of the Annual Development Review of their programmes

- the maximum number of personal tutees allocated to any one tutor,
- any training or induction activities undertaken by members of the department, and
- how the functioning of personal tutor system has been monitored.

College Academic Committees should report on the functioning of the Personal Tutor System in their College to Academic Policy Committee so that good practice and any issues can be shared across the University.