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From Non-Traditional to Individual: looking beyond the stereotypes by developing a systematic approach to first year retention and progression

ABSTRACT

In the current climate of increasingly competitive, marketised higher education, many institutions have placed retention and progression high on their agenda. Student withdrawal is not only financially costly for all involved, but also adversely affects admissions targets and causes students undue stress and anxiety.

Many authors have identified higher than average drop-out rates amongst so-called 'non-traditional' students who now often represent the majority in those mainly post-1992 institutions that focus strongly in this area. In an attempt to understand and cope with this issue researchers have attempted to classify both the students and the reasons that may cause them to leave higher education (HE). The picture is one of extreme diversity and complexity, with a range of views about the main cause of withdrawal and therefore about potential solutions for overcoming it, many suggesting that we must somehow help the student to adapt to the unfamiliar university environment.

Given the current context of increased national student participation levels and widening participation this approach alone is perhaps insufficient. Universities that are serious about addressing retention and progression must become more customer-focused; instead of trying to adapt students to fit HE, it is they that must adapt to fit the needs all including the new, majority, 'non-traditional' students.

This paper presents a case study of a new university with high levels of non-traditional students and on-going retention and progression issues. We provide an example of how realigning key processes in relation to teaching, learning and student support with identified student needs can improve retention and progression. We specifically address the need for sensitivity to individual requirements, managed through flexibility and the integration of information systems with a customer-focused mind-set. For the future, a holistic approach is recommended which focuses on changing the university environment – both structurally and culturally – to meet the needs of all our students and to help them thrive, whatever their circumstances.

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(August, 2006)

INTRODUCTION

Over many years, in the UK, US and worldwide, there has been a substantial amount of research into the nature of students and their experience of University. Much of the research into the growing problem of student retention and progression in higher education (HE) has centred upon issues with the students themselves, and did not originally distinguish between traditional and non-traditional students (Laing & Robinson, 2003). More recently, as HE becomes a mass system, the focus has mainly switched to the stereotypical 'non-traditional' student and the problems they create for institutions structured for a 'traditional' university experience. This interest in the student's own perspective is a relatively new phenomenon, triggered in the UK by the current government's WP agenda that aims to achieve 50% participation in HE by 2010, primarily from under-represented (i.e. non-traditional) target groups such as the socio-economic groups III-V, people with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities (Macdonald & Stratta, 2001).

WP is expanding both the size and nature of the student body in higher education and has given rise to terms such as "traditional" and "non-traditional" students to distinguish between those students who have always been recruited into HE and the newer target groups that will enable HEIs to reach their WP quotas. The term 'non-traditional' itself remain nebulous, seems to be most often used in the literature in relation to students deriving from lower, more disadvantaged socio-economic groups that will make up the bulk of the expansion of student numbers in the majority 18-21 age group recruited through UCAS.

Specifically, there is now increased recognition that a strong link exists between widening participation (WP) programmes, the problematic nature of non-traditional students recruited through WP, and, retention and progression issues (Laing et al, 2003, 2005) arising from more frequent voluntary student departure.

The primary framework adopted for the analysis of reasons for student departure is Tinto's student integration model of attrition (Tinto, 1975, 1982). In simple terms, those students who do not achieve sufficient levels of social and academic integration are more likely to drop-out through lack of commitment to achieving personal goals and/or lack of commitment to the institution at which they are studying.

Tinto distinguishes between voluntary and compulsory withdrawal, and it is the former that we are concerned with here. Voluntary withdrawal is a decision made by the student, at a point where they no longer have enough commitment to continue with their studies at that particular institution due to lack of integration. Compulsory withdrawal would be more concerned with academic failure and the institution requiring the student to leave. Retention programmes focus on both these areas, but it is the voluntary withdrawal in particular that relates directly to the student experience and to social integration, especially during the first year of study. It is also voluntary withdrawal that is most difficult to plan for and more likely to be attributed to non-traditional students.

Interestingly, as the numbers of non-traditional students rise through WP, there seems to be a transition of thinking and research activity occurring, moving from emphasis on the student as the "issue", to focus on the nature of higher education institutions (HEIs) as the root of the problem. The implication is that rather than changing the student to fit the institution, we must try to change the institution to meet the needs of its diverse (and often largely non-traditional) students.

This shift in thinking is especially pertinent as student finance becomes an ever-increasing burden through the introduction of tuition fees. With students effectively now 'paying customers', there is a strong argument for taking a more customer-focussed approach to HE provision at the institution level. As in any other customer-focussed service business, the onus should therefore be on providing a product/service that students want and fits their needs, and on offering support mechanisms to enable them to overcome any obstacles in using that product for achievement of a successful outcome.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two main strands of over-lapping research relevant to the perceived issue of student retention in mainly post-1992 universities with a dominant WP strategy. The first relates to classification of so-called 'non-traditional' (NT) students into identifiable groups with particular behaviours and attitudes, with ensuing discussion of the various challenges arising from managing students of this nature. The second relates to the reasons for student withdrawal, which may be student or institution-based, and the associated impact on retention levels. The two areas come together in a general consensus that students classified as non-traditional are more prone to leave higher education early than traditional ones and therefore require identification and/or different handling in order to address a variety of integration issues and to improve student retention.

A further related area of research then goes on to specifically consider solutions to the problem of student withdrawal. The main focus in this area is on a variety of ad hoc approaches to improving retention by implementing programmes that are specifically aimed at dealing with issues that may cause early withdrawal, particularly during the first year of study. Most of these studies are primarily qualitative in nature and relate to a single institution, or department within an institution.

Morgan's review of the literature (no date) in all of these areas provides a comprehensive and broad survey of research to date and presents a number of pertinent questions and recommendations for further research, in particular, research at departmental (operational) level, longitudinal research into what happens to withdrawing students and also into which initiatives work best to improve retention.

For the purposes of this paper, the authors have focussed on the specific issues that are relevant to non-traditional students in post-1992 or 'new' universities, and in particular in relation to retention and progression of first year students.

The Nature of Non-Traditional Students

Research related to identifying the nature of non-traditional students has been widespread. Encompassed under this general tenet is investigation of the student experience and an attempt to categorise non-traditional students, developing a profile of identifiable characteristics, as different from traditional students.

The purpose of much of this area of research seems to be to fit non-traditional students into neat categories, each with associated issues that can then be addressed with specific retention activities. By stereotyping and 'ghettoising' non-traditional students in this way, they are automatically being pigeon-holed as problems that need to be solved, preferably by adapting them to fit the traditional student mould in the accepted norm of the traditional higher education environment.

Whilst this may seem to be a logical approach to systematically identify and deal with a significant problem, it ignores the fact that non-traditional students are not a homogenous group. The single issue approach may therefore be far too simplistic and many researchers are now concluding that in reality, non-traditional students exhibit a *range* of characteristics that may make their transition into and persistence with higher education more problematic than for traditional students (Morgan, no date). Deriving from a variety of national and more ad hoc single institution studies, there now seems to be an emerging set of accepted "truisms" related to NT students, relative to traditional students:

1. NT students derive largely from more financially disadvantaged postcode areas and socio-economic groups
2. NT students are likely to need to undertake paid employment whilst studying
3. NT students will tend to be the first generation to attend university in their family
4. NT students are more likely to live at home and attend a local university
5. NT students are more likely to attend New Universities
6. NT student are more likely to have poorer or non-standard (A-level) entry qualifications
7. NT students are more likely to have joined late or through the clearing process
8. NT students more likely to leave their course early

Morgan (no date) provides a comprehensive review of the literature into many of these characteristics.

Crucially, it can be argued that many of the characteristics exhibited by non-traditional students are inter-related, and link closely to student withdrawal. For instance, NT students may have poorer entry qualifications, in turn, meaning they are also more likely to join a New University with lower entry requirements, more likely to join courses later in the enrolment cycle and to go through clearing or accept a place at their second choice university, raising issues of both social and academic integration. Yorke and Longden's (2004) analysis of HEFCE data clearly shows that there is a connection between 'deprivation' and A-level points score. There is also a strong (although not necessarily causal) relationship between lower socio-economic group and non-continuation after year one of HE study, indicating that:

> "pupils from deprived areas are more likely to obtain weak A-level grades and hence are at greater risk of non-completion" (p.51).

Furthermore, the demographic and socio-economic profile of non-traditional students, deriving from more deprived neighbourhoods makes them more susceptible to financial hardship. This would certainly impact on their ability to live away from home due to the non-availability of parental financial support, their need for paid employment whilst studying and their propensity to leave early due to financial problems, one of the primary reasons stated for drop-out. These students are also more likely to be debt averse than their traditional counterparts. Yorke & Longden (2004. p.53) present the argument that

> "students' need to take part-time employment was affecting their academic performance, and that financial pressures were felt most acutely by students from the lower socio-economic groups" (p.53).

In addition to financial pressures, living in the family home, potentially travelling into university from some distance each day and the need for a substantial amount of part-time employment all make it still more difficult for non-traditional students to integrate socially with their fellow students, causing further stress. Students from lower socio-economic groups are also more likely to be the first in their family to go to university and may therefore lack a degree of support and empathy from their family and friends in relation to the higher education experience.

Reasons for Student Withdrawal
Much research in this area follows on from, and further develops work by Tinto (1975, 1982) into the issue of (lack of) student integration, directly causing withdrawal and drop-out behaviours, and ultimately resulting in retention and progression issues. Although Tinto's model does not specifically identify non-traditional students as the root of the retention and progression conundrum, it may be argued the areas of non-

integration that are highlighted may be exacerbated by some of the challenges faced by this group.

According to Tinto's model of student integration (1975, 1982), social integration gives rise to a feeling of belonging and is concerned with elements such as making friends, contact with and support from academics and other university staff, enjoyment of the university environment, fit with the university culture, and satisfaction with university systems and processes. Accommodation and financial issues may also inhibit social integration as they can have a detrimental effect on social integration. In particular, non-traditional students are more likely to live at home and therefore to miss out on social integration opportunities arising from living with other students. They may also face travel problems and have to cope with other pressing personal commitments.

Academic integration is achieved when the student feels that they have chosen the right course, are enjoying studying for that course and are realising their potential as a student. Lack of academic integration may stem from uncertainty about what progress they are making, lack of confidence with study skills, not coping with the quantity (workload) and level of academic study, dislike of the course content and teaching styles, etc.

Furthermore, over a period of time, the likelihood of dropping-out shifts from being more affected by lack of social integration to being more affected by lack of academic integration. Several authors have evidenced that drop-out is most likely in the first year of study and even more so in the first term of study (Morgan, no date), suggesting that social integration should be a central part of retention programmes targeted at first year students. However, in order to avoid later issues arising from low academic integration, it is also necessary to address needs in this area from an early stage in the course as well.

Thomas (2002) goes further than Tinto and starts to look at a more detailed model comprising a wide variety of issues affecting student integration that may form a platform for institutional change: academic preparedness; academic experience; institutional expectations and commitment; academic and social match; finance and employment issues; family support and commitments; and, availability and use of university support services. Similarly, Yorke and Longden (2004) identify 4 categories of reasons for student withdrawal: flawed decision-making about their course; the overall student experience; failure to cope with the quantity and quality of academic work; and, outside, personal events.

A common conclusion about the reasons for student withdrawal is that every case is different; that it is not possible to accurately predict which students will drop-out, when and why (Morgan, no date; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Two students with identical backgrounds and performance may have different individual experiences and perceptions and it is these that finally determine which one will leave and which will persist. It surely follows therefore that HEIs enrolling large numbers of non-traditional students through WP have a duty of care to provide an environment in which difficulties can be minimised, and in which each individual student can thrive and succeed.

Solutions to the Problem
The next level of research relates to potential solutions to the problem of student withdrawal. The main focus here is on approaches to improving retention, comprising mostly empirical studies focussing on individual programmes at specific universities, along with a handful of national studies from the 1990s.

Solutions presented for improved retention can be categorised into three main areas, (i) general student-focussed initiatives that are made available to the entire student body, (ii) more pro-active student-focussed initiatives that attempt to identify groups of or individual 'at-risk' students, and, (iii) those initiatives focussing on the need for institutional change to accommodate the changing nature of the student body.

General student-centred initiatives
Responses to the problem, initially involved addressing what were seen as issues contributing to poor retention of some student groups. So for example the emergence of skills support tutors, more substantial personal tutor systems, student mentoring schemes, pre-sessional summer schools and the enhancing of induction week activities is an attempt to integrate the student on a social level, as well as provide information. There are doubts about the impact of induction on social integration especially since as Wilcox et al (2005) point out social integration is a long term staged process of personal negotiation between pre-university and university life. A further, more fundamental problem with this approach is that, induction aside, it relies heavily on the student to seek out help (assuming they have identified themselves as needing it). Often it is the students who theoretically do not need the help that seek assistance.

Pro-active student-focussed initiatives
Next we have initiatives that are *pro-active*[1] targeting specific students who are seen as potentially "at-risk" of non-completion and withdrawal (Morgan, no date). Part of this process might be the identification of students who are likely to leave by their personal characteristics, but this approach is problematic in that it potentially discriminates, albeit in a positive way. Additionally, it may be that dangerous precedents are set here that go against the idea of HE and the themes espoused through the discourse of widening participation, that some students are not worthy of higher education. Other more productive approaches might include profiling academic skills and providing selective support to those who exhibit weaknesses, profiling students learning styles and adapting teaching methods to suit, or helping the student to adapt their learning styles, and, monitoring attendance.

Attendance monitoring in particular, is flagged up by Morgan (no date) as an opportunity, but is not explored in any detail. We have taken the stance that institutions have to do more than simply monitor attendance, they need to provid support to students experiencing difficulties, but, crucially, they must also make it easier for the student to attend, given their complex circumstances. For this reason, we have included this solution in the institutional change category.

Institutional change initiatives
Lastly, is the all-encompassing change; that which concentrates effort on institutional elements, culminating in significant change to the environment in which the student is attempting to integrate socially and academically. Here we have change initiatives that accept growing student diversity and attempt to provide improved, more flexible environments in which all students, whatever their profile or individual circumstances, are provided with the opportunity to succeed. This by implication ignores the student per-se, and attempts to influence or change the institution itself. It could, for example, involve changing teaching and delivery methods, staff development, flexible

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[1] NB: the above student-centred process is <u>not</u> pro-active as it provides a generic approach of service provision that relies on the student identifying themselves as needing support and taking the initiative to seek out help.

timetabling and course delivery modes, or perhaps changes in non-academic processes, driven by information systems.

Napier University which has been involved in addressing the retention and progression issue for over a decade, report that University wide improvements first year pass rates of 9%, of an increase in 19% in student passing all modules, and a greater engagement in retention issues by all staff. Johnstone (undated). Unfortunately it does not indicate over what period this covers, nor is it useful at an operational level as to the relative impact of any solutions. Most research on retention and progression at least acknowledges somewhere the problem of lack of available data, and or the lack of effective systems for collecting and collating data.

Yorke et al (2003) discovered that few institutions that seemed to perform relatively well on retention and progression were able to pin down the specific reasons for that success, or attribute it to any one particular initiative. They go on to attribute this as a "consequence of limitations in the availability of institutional data". Bowen et al (2005) imply a problem of effective data in HE institutions in the context of attendance monitoring systems, and even though they were referring to Australian Universities the problem seems to be mirrored in the UK. Christie et al (2004) clearly indicate that the research agenda needs to address institutional issues and bemoan the lack of evidence on the effectiveness of support mechanisms, ending with a call to change the "institutional habitus". One suspects that the inadequacies of existing University information systems and the almost complete lack of operational level live information systems that can track students is a major contribution to this.

The received wisdom based on research to date is that activities such as improved induction, the provision of skills support, enhanced personal tutor systems, and in some cases, changes in teaching methods (Taylor 2005) all have merit in addressing potential problems that may affect student persistence. Yorke et al (2004) summarise those areas impacting on retention and progression, providing a detailed list of actions that could help solve the problem. Interestingly, they offer little in the way of institutional structural and process changes, such as the need to track students attendance and progress through live data capture, and even were teaching is mentioned do not refer to more fundamental changes such as delivery structure. The Sixth report on Education (2001) which looked at retention, echoes this concern, specifically with relation to indicative data:

> "if you want to ... look at these [non-completion] issues you have to do two things. You have to look at and compare those people who are in the system with those people who are not in the system. Similarly you have to compare those people who have dropped out with those who have not dropped out. Basically in order to do that what one needs is data that tracks people over a period of time. In this country we have no data sources whatsoever that can do that. No institution, whatever it be, HEFCE, DfEE can actually do this research".[137]

Whilst the report refers to data at a strategic industry level the implication is clear, in order to obtain said data, under any circumstances of context it still needs to be collected at an operational level, then aggregated to the level implied here.

Summary
One thing that is clear from Tinto's model (1975, 1982) is that students who do persist are better integrated both socially and academically and it is important therefore that universities address both of these needs. As it is also impossible to predict which individual or groups of students will ultimately drop-out, and it is far too complex and costly to deal with individual students on a personal level, retention and

progression programmes should focus on changing those institutional factors that affect the student experience and enhance the possibility of integration, for all students whatever their background. These might focus on areas such as improving attendance through customer-focused flexible timetabling, student-friendly delivery structures, as well as the various student support structures that are now accepted as the norm.

The Locus of Change?

Running throughout the literature there is an sub-theme that it is the responsibility of institutions to change some of their fundamental ways of doing things in order to address retention and progression issues at a deeper level. Laing & Robertson (2003) suggest there needs to be an appropriate fit between the teaching delivery model and the expectations of the student, with the emphasis on required change by the institution to meet those expectations. Christie et al (2004) note the necessity for achieving a "good fit" between the institution and the students, reflecting Tinto's theory on integration. Similarly, Rhodes & Neville (2004) considered student satisfaction and suggested that it was within the power of institutions to:

> "..manage such facets in order that all students, including non-traditional students, may become integrated, retained and maintain their personal vision"

The implication here is it is the institution and not the student that should be the focus in achieving the match. Yorke and Longden (2004) summarise the areas where effort is required to address the issue of student retention including, the need to structure the learning process so that "active" learning methods are used that lead to an increased chance of student engagement, the implication being that traditional methods of teaching in HE such as the lecture need to be replaced with more student-centred ones. Read et al. (2003) identify the nature of the "struggle" that non-traditional students have in the process of fitting into the traditional university environment, the result of which is a gravitation towards new universities, subsequently propagating the traditional culture found in old universities. They suggest that:

> "There is a need for initiatives to focus on "cultural" aspects of the academy such as methods and styles of teaching and learning."

Eijkman (2002), writing on the Australian context, supports the need to address mismatch between the common discourse found amongst non-traditional students and the traditional middle-class discourse common in the traditional university environment.

Recognition of the importance of the first year experience is also apparent. Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) recommend a university-wide approach to the problem of retention and progression, with an emphasis on the year one experience. Yorke et al (2004) suggest that institutions should commit a "disproportionate" proportion of resources in support of the first year, and posit that this actually may run counter to the practice of "backloading" in some institutions.

Clearly, it is apparent that whilst there is an acceptance of the need for institutions to make substantial changes in order to re-align themselves with the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, there is little evidence of those fundamental wide-ranging structural changes yet being implemented in a strategic capacity. We would argue that in an increasingly customer-focussed (fee-paying) environment, this level of change is not only crucial to institutional and student success, but also long over-due.

The Research Environment:

Lack of Data on Effectiveness of Retention Activities

Whilst much can be learned from the existing literature, we are left with a grey area in that there are seemingly a wide variety of impacts on retention and progression, which may or may not all be relevant to any one individual institutional situation. The problem is one of complexity and diversity of issues and solutions that has defied standardisation or rationalisation, and for which research may have provided some understanding of the nature and context of the problem but, as yet little in the way of longitudinal data that can support the relative effectiveness of any specific solutions.

Case Study Background

The case study relates to a longitudinal Retention and Progression project in the Department of Business Studies at the University of Huddersfield, a post-1992 higher education institution with a clear strategy of widening participation, and consequently in the recruitment of non-traditional students. In the period 1998-2003, the university performed above the national average and significantly higher than the HEFCE benchmarks in the levels of participation for students from state schools and colleges, and from lower socio-economic groups. In 2004, 46% of first year students attending the university were recruited from the three lowest socio-economic groups. Courses in the Department of Business Studies match this institutional performance.

Additionally, a recent survey of the 2005 first year Business Studies cohort substantiates several of the more general characteristics attributed to non-traditional students:

- 57.8% of students were living at home
- 70% had parents who had not attended university
- % expected to take up part-time employment whilst studying

The institution was aware that student persistence in some undergraduate courses was relatively poor, withdrawal rates high, and failure rates of students who persisted to the end of the first year were also high. Although the pattern varied across courses, the Business Studies subject area was relatively poor. In 2001, a preliminary report was compiled by the First Year Tutor (Duty, 2003) identifying a number of key areas requiring attention:

1. Consistent student timetable (avoiding changes after term had started)
2. Collection of student personal circumstantial data in induction, used to provide timetable suitable to them
3. Attempt to use only full-time staff for year one teaching
4. Ensure all core year one team (Year Tutor, Admissions Tutor and Course Leader) are involved in teaching year one students
5. Attempt to use one tutor per module for year one teaching
6. Monitor attendance on a weekly basis, record and act on information gathered
7. Select relevant staff and provide training for year one personal tutors (recognising that not all staff are suited to this task)
8. Formalise structure of personal tutor system, level of obligation, and subsequent assessment. Nature of assessment to be developmental, linked to Personal Development Plan (PDP)
9. Induction week: ensure students are aware of their responsibilities; provide student with wallet-sized "survival guide"; avoid information overload; engage students

Although these recommendations broadly reflect the literature on potential solutions to retention and progression, some additional significant problem areas were

identified; lack of information about the nature and extent of student withdrawal and its impact on retention and progression, and, on-going student attendance issues. Additionally, the report focussed on approaches to teaching which, as the project developed, became a core issue for consideration.

METHODOLOGY

The central concern of the project is student retention and progression, and in particular what initiatives can be successfully employed to address the problem. The project was, and still is, largely experimental in its approach, actively implementing various techniques, monitoring their effectiveness through both quantitative and qualitative techniques, and attempting to identify causal relationships from the ensuing data. The project has also needed to be evaluative throughout as in order to inform allocation of resources into the areas producing clear evidence of positive results.

Those initiatives to be implemented were identified from a review of the literature and from the department's own student feedback, with priorities established from an internal report on retention and progression (Duty, 2003). Standard retention solutions were phased in first, and these have been adapted based on response from students and staff. Structural change initiatives were then introduced from 2004, along with the associated improvement in available data for managing the new processes.

Data collection has focussed on two main areas, Firstly the collection of relevant longitudinal data about student characteristics, attendance and performance through a combination of survey and observational techniques, against which the impact of various staged initiatives could be measured, and secondly through ethnographic feedback from the students themselves, primarily through student feedback mechanisms and through informal contact with the first year tutor in both academic and social contexts.

The business courses annually recruit around 100 students. During the research period, there were 7 degree courses, five of which share 5 core modules in common and two of which are joint degrees where half the modules are in the business school and half in the relevant school. To date, data has been compiled over a period of 4 consecutive years, two years before the structural changes were implemented, and two years afterwards. Aggregated indicators for cohorts on the range of Business Studies degrees are provided in Appendix 1. In 2002 and 2003 this data was simply collected and collated on spreadsheets. In 2004 and 2005 the data was extracted from an operational level student support information system. The data collected increased in volume, diversity and detail during the research period, and became more standardised and easily correlated for statistical analysis from 2004 when the student support system was introduced.

RESULTS

Application of Standard Retention 'Solutions'

Induction

Induction activities have been posited by some as a way to mitigate the effects of "transfer shock" (Norrie 2003), and generally be a way of "welcoming" and integrating students at an early stage. From 2003 we developed a comprehensive schedule for the week aimed at integrating the student both socially and academically. Whilst it was broadly positively received, several challenges arose. Firstly it was resource intensive in terms of planning and expected time commitment of staff. Secondly, we experienced variable attendance of students, with many deciding not to attend any sessions they deemed unimportant, or indeed could not attend out of necessity such as employment commitments. In some sessions attendance dropped to around 70%.

We therefore acted on these observations and changed the way we used induction, developing more of a customer focus, with the following key elements:

1. Provide succinct, useful information to students (handy guide)
2. Deliver survival guide sessions (e.g. skills support, importance of attendance, etc with supporting quantitative evidence of outcomes)
3. Put students at ease (especially any actively considering withdrawal from day one)

The format is now well-established and continues to be improved based on student feedback.

Skills support

A central concern for us was the type and level of skills that students had when they arrived at university. Like many institutions we set up a separate skills support unit available to all students. Starting in 2003, it initially existed as a drop-in centre. Uptake was minimal at first with only five year one students visiting out of a cohort of more than 100. We observed that students were unlikely to seek out support due to the negative connotations of admitting they needed help, and secondly, the process of identifying skills support needs required students to fill in a detailed questionnaire of which few were able/prepared to identify their weaknesses.

In 2004 we initiated a more positive approach, establishing a session during induction week provided by skills support staff entitled "How to improve your performance". We emphasised to everyone the benefits of using skills support, irrespective of their background and abilities. In support of this, we set a summative piece of coursework for a core module in week 2, designed in conjunction with the skills tutor, strongly urging students to visit the support unit before they submitted in week 5. Data was captured comparing the performance of students who visited the skills tutor compared to those who did not:

- In 2004, 17% of students visited the skills tutor, achieving an average mark of 74%, whilst 83% of students who decided not to visit achieved an average of 64%
- In 2005, 30% of students visited the skills tutor, achieving an average mark of 67%, whilst the 70% that did not visit achieved an average of 60%

In 2005, evidence from 2004 was presented to new students, perhaps explaining the increase in skills tutor visits in 2005. We noted with interest the difference in performance figures for 2005, and expect that in 2004 the students who visited may have been those who were already more able. This might also explain the lower average performance in 2005, as more students of all abilities were encouraged to

attend. This year data will be collected to identify the "types" of student visiting skills support. Given that students are obtaining help useful in all areas of academic work, we can further assume that this should improve their overall performance and have some impact on progression, although perhaps more specific indicative research is required.

Personal tutors

Many authors positing potential retention solutions include some aspect of personal tutor provision. Before our project began, all staff took part in the personal tutoring, each having a quota of students allocated. The view was that the personal tutor was simply a resource available to the student, having the concomitant impact of almost universal lack of use by students.

In 2004 we piloted a new system based on the use of a small number of staff deemed to be more "student friendly" alongside a formal system of visits where scheduled discussions were to take place based on student performance, and any non-academic issues as needed. The results were again disappointing, with 30% of students failing to visit tutors at all, and most students attending only 1 of the 3 visits. Two problems were identified. Firstly, the level of obligation was not made clear, and secondly, there was no structure of responsibility for personal tutors, nor a guide to reporting.

In 2005, a personal development plan (PDP) was introduced for students tied into the personal tutor system. Again it was voluntary, and even though it was linked to assessment in one core module there was still a relatively low completion rate.

Today we are still struggling with an appropriate structure for personal tutoring, but it seems that students themselves prefer a voluntary system where personal tutors are an available resource. As one student stated:

> "look all I need is someone to talk to if I need to, I don't care who, as long as they are available when I want to see them, and they listen".

This academic year we plan to present the personal tutor as an available resource, which the student can access when they want. Importantly, personal tutors will provide specific times when they will be available for year one students only, and this will hopefully mitigate one consistent problem indicated by students, lack of tutor availability.

Applying Structural Change Solutions

The following analysis looks at the use of techniques requiring some fundamental change at the institutional level, for example the use of new systems, or changes to the way in which staff and courses operate.

Tracking attendance and performance

In 2002 and 2003 the first year tutor began collecting detailed data on student attendance and performance for the first time. In order to obtain weekly attendance data it was necessary to work closely with subject tutors and in most cases there was a positive response, although it was by no means universal. Attendance was taken in tutorials, since lectures were problematic mainly due to larger student numbers. All data was entered into a spreadsheet on Monday following the week it was collected.

Student performance data was more difficult to access, since it was not usually provided to anybody except the students as feedback, and administrative staff for processing, and was mainly recorded at the end of the academic year. By 2003 the process had been significantly improved. There were a number of contributing factors. In 2002, three out of six modules were delivered by departments other than Business Studies, reducing to two in 2003. Our experience is that more effective course management is facilitated where there is a high level of departmental control, perhaps due to different cultures and processes within other schools. Additionally, we began implementing some of the recommendations from the preliminary report (Duty 2003), particularly the use of one tutor per subject and full-time staff only, making data capture much simpler.

In 2004, an internally designed student support information system was introduced, comprising a Microsoft Access database. It enabled us to bring together all the data that had previously been collected in a more ad hoc way, giving us additional live tracking capabilities. In many ways it is like a simple customer relationship management (CRM) system, with two main categories of data; profile data and live tracking data. Personal profile and background data on each student are collected mainly during induction week, This includes much of what was already available from other university systems, but which was difficult to access and use at an operational level, along with other relevant information which is not generally available, e.g. whether the student was the first in the family to attend university, distance travelled to university, and type of accommodation. Since the system has been in place, the process of tracking students via attendance and performance data has been very effective. Attendance data for each student on every module is collected weekly, and performance data collected when it occurs.

Live tracking data allows long term individual support of every student through the monitoring of trends in attendance and performance. The data is used pro-actively in a number of ways. Most critically, it has enabled early identification of students who are having problems, in some cases even after missing just one seminar. The year tutor can then take supportive action. Additionally, up-to-date student performance data has enabled much closer academic support as we can now identify where individual students are struggling across all subject areas, and which students have failed to submit. The year tutor collates combined student performance reports and provides these to students for benchmarking purposes. Student response was positive overall, and after a few weeks students actually requested their own reports via email.

A by-product of the system is the availability of aggregated management information at the student cohort level. Most of this data has still to be interrogated in-depth, but it has already provided some interesting insights into retention and progression. For instance, it provides strategic cohort data for each year, illustrating correlation of attendance and performance in various subjects. It has also enabled the development of a risk assessment tool and shows where there are patterns to student withdrawal and the reasons for withdrawal.

Some initial problems were experienced, though not insurmountable. Initially much of the feedback was late, and in some cases several weeks after the attendance monitoring occurred. Some tutors felt that attendance was an unnecessary additional administrative burden and failed to return, and some felt that attendance was not their responsibility, taking the view that students are responsible for their own learning and conduct at university. Input of data is still manually completed, about 2 man hours each Monday, but we are currently looking at electronic data input, and downloading some data from other university systems.

Changing the delivery structure

Up to 2004 the teaching delivery model used was the traditional lecture/tutorial system. From observations and student feedback it became increasingly evident that this form of delivery was becoming less suitable for the types of students that we were recruiting. The problem derived from two specific areas directly related to non-traditional students. Firstly, students were finding the learning process difficult under the lecture/tutorial system due to poor academic skills., evident from, e.g. students' inability to take effective notes, and reports from academic staff of student learning issues. Students also reported that if they didn't understand something it was not possible to stop the lecturer and ask for clarification, and subsequently some students avoided tutorials because they felt ill-prepared. Secondly, under the lecture/tutorial system, the lecture segment was timetabled in one session for all students. Across five core subjects, this approach demanded 5 hours of inflexible attendance often on different days of the week, which many non-traditional students found difficult to accommodate around employment and other personal commitments.

After much discussion within the department it was decided that the lecture method was no longer a suitable mode of delivery for year one students. In its place we decided to initiate a system based on 2-hour seminars, so instead of one lecture backed up by several tutorials, we established four identical seminar sessions per subject area running at different times during the week

For implementation of the new structure we ask students during induction to indicate on a blank timetable which periods during the week they were not available due to outside commitments. The new information system has a scheduling feature enabling fast creation of individual student timetables and easy facilitation of changes, if for example a student's circumstances changed at a later date. By removing some of the barriers to attendance, we can illustrate that this has had a positive affect on attendance levels.

A more fundamental benefit of using seminars over lectures is related to the learning styles of non-traditional students. Evidence from student feedback questionnaires, through liaison and more informal discourse has provided an overwhelming indication of support for the seminar system. Feedback from the 2004 cohort, now in their second year, indicates a solid preference for seminars, reflected in the following comments:

> "I expected to be sitting in a lecture theatre with lots of other students, but it was a pleasant surprise to be in a small seminar."

> "It is better in a small group because you can stop the lecturer and ask for help"

> "I was a bit unsure about coming to University, but when we had our first seminars it was a lot like college. I felt very comfortable"

Another perceived benefit is the improved relationship between subject tutor and student. Lectures are not conducive to producing a close relationship, especially when there may be several different tutors for tutorials. A seminar has the potential effect of facilitating a closer bond between the tutor and student, enabling academic problems to be pre-empted and encouraging student integration.

The initial concern of management regarding the new delivery structure was resource and administration in areas such as scheduling, timetabling and rooming, but this

proved to be minimal. Delivering four 2-hour seminars (working on four seminar groups of 20-25 students each) requires eight frontline teaching hours, an increase of one hour over the lecture/tutorial system in most modules, but a reduction or one hour in modules where two 1-hour lectures were delivered.

Initial student feedback indicated that some tutors found it difficult to adapt their teaching style to fit the new delivery format, prompting action to be taken that was immediately visible to students. Problems arose were there was more than one tutor, or where the module was delivered by another school. To address these issues, for the first time this year we have decided to deliver all 5 core in-house, with one tutor for each subject.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Analysing the longitudinal data

Aggregate data across four years is presented in Appendix 1[2]. There is a clear change in two measures for 2004. Across all subjects there was an observed increase in attendance, and a concomitant decrease in fail rates.

The progression figures indicate some interesting trends. In 2002 and 2003 they were relatively poor with 84% and 75% progressing respectively. In 2004 and 2005 the figures were 92% and 93% respectively. This significantly improved performance in 2004 is reflected in the attendance of students. Additionally, there was an overall improvement in performance in all five subjects, and an increase across all subjects in the proportion of students who passed.

Withdrawal is a concern and data, not shown here showing the point at which students withdraw, indicates some interesting trends that may or may not support accepted theory. We suspect that the use of the student tracking system identifies some withdrawing students earlier. Thus, students whose data might have stayed in the system up to final exams because of processing issues, now show up much earlier as withdrawal. This would tend to suggest a pretty stable withdrawal rate, but this is our next task - reducing withdrawal. Students leaving early often cite wrong choice of degree and may then transfer to a different course or leave, so perhaps more pre-entry counselling on choice would ameliorate this problem. Linked to this issue is the proportion of students in the cohort that are repeating their studies having failed more than one of their subjects. It can be seen that repeat students are more likely to discontinue, an average of around 50%. This compares with around 10% of newly recruited students who withdraw. This causes a knock-on effect, as students who fail to progress spill over into the next year thus affecting the cohort statistics for that year. This seems to be particularly evident for the 2004 cohort, where 13.7% of those enrolling were repeat students, and there was a relatively high withdrawal rate of 15.8%.

Two additional variables that are included in the table are the proportion of male and female students, and the proportion of students living at home versus university accommodation. Our data seems to indicate that students living at home are more likely not to persist. The proportion of students leaving who were living at home is 68.8%, compared to a cohort percentage over the four years of 57.6%. Likewise, the proportion of male leavers is 70.8%, compared to a cohort comprising 64.1% male students. Whilst this summary data by no means indicates a causal relationship, it does show that there are a wide variety of characteristics that may be attributed to withdrawing students .The 'living at home' aspect may suggest that these non-traditional students have failed to integrate as well as more traditional students living in university accommodation, yet, the male characteristic is more typical of traditional students.

The only conclusion we can draw here then is that specific characteristics of withdrawing students may provide a useful indicator of wider issues that would require more in-depth investigation to understand cause and effect. What is important is that we now have *available* a substantial amount of both profile and tracking data

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[2] Figures for retention and progression are calculated in a somewhat simpler way than normal but these are operational figures. Progression represents the proportion of students who are still registered with the university and who progress into year 2. Retention represents the proportion of students that progress to year 2 compared to total students who were recruited in that year, so in our measure retention figures cannot exceed progression figures.

in a readily accessible format that can provide both an early warning and some suggestions as to which aspects of student life may require further support and assistance to improve integration and ultimately to increase retention and progression.

Shifting the transfer shock

Whilst not overtly considered as an objective, it has become evident that activities aiming to improve the student experience in year one are in effect attempting to shift the transfer shock that students face in moving from a school/college environment to a higher education environment from year one to year two. This is an important change as the student effectively now has a 12 month transition period in which they can become more confident in their abilities to cope with a degree course. The two core activities of the Huddersfield project - changing the teaching delivery structure to small seminars, and making use of close student tracking and support - is something that all students would be familiar with from pre-University educational environments. This theme of making a link between pre-University and University study is strongly supported by Blythman and Orr (2002) who present a clear case for making use of the familiar experiences of pre-University systems and policies in order to address retention problems within HE. In effect, we have therefore potentially reduced the incidence of withdrawal that would have perhaps occurred as a result of transfer shock and the mismatch between the experience and expectations of non-traditional students and the predominant traditional university culture.

However, in addressing one problem we are aware of potentially creating others. There are two issues that have emerged. First is the impact of the transfer from year one to year two. Although subsequent analysis of data does not indicate any increase in student withdrawal in year two, there is substantial evidence from students themselves that they find the second year a substantially different experience in terms of how they are dealt with. Secondly, students have indicated a strong preference for the seminar system of year one over the mainly traditional lecture/tutorial system that is utilised in year two. We recognise the predominant culture of HE implies particular expectations of students who enter the system based on developing self motivated learning, a theme picked up by Lahteenoja et al (2005) in a study of Finnish Universities that identified the dichotomous problem of the changing nature of University students, the attitude of staff, and the level of support provided by institutions, stating:

> "There was a large consensus on not mothering or pampering students-but a lesser one on what should be done"

Obviously this is potentially problematic, but we hope that the simple process of being in the University environment for 12 months with equip the students with the "nouse" to cope, as well as equipping them with skills to better equip them for subsequent study. The department is also starting to look at the nature of provision post year one to assess the need for this more flexible style of teaching delivery throughout our undergraduate courses.

Problems related to change

Techniques for addressing retention and progression each come with a need to commit resources, and in some cases make structural changes. Some are at a support level and don't necessarily impact on structure and culture, e.g. induction, skills support, etc. Some though do require major change, and thus are more onerous in their implementation. As our data seems to indicate though it seems that it is exactly these types of changes that can have the greatest impact.

Unsurprisingly, we have also discovered from our own project that interventions requiring significant structural change are difficult for HE institutions to embrace, having major implications for the nature of academic jobs, for the way in which processes are managed, and resource requirements. They strike at the heart of what HE institutions traditionally stand for and challenge the assumption of the responsibility being with students to fit in, showing that this method of delivery is out-moded when addressing a highly diverse and heterogeneous mass market audience of non-traditional students. We have experienced that the most persistent barriers to change are primarily related to culture and deep-seated attitudes about the nature of HE, which will inevitably take some considerable time and effort to overcome. There are, as we have shown, major implications for the management structure of academics, and the role of what academic managers, course leaders and year tutors should be doing to move towards a customer focus for our newly fee-paying students.

Academic attitudes are vitally important, and changing their points of view is central to any policy that includes institutional change. The research on staff attitudes is not volumous, and where it exists, staff generally support the view that persistence is not their problem. Taylor & Bedford (2004), relating to the Australian context, provide evidence of this attitude and somewhat worryingly, that academics seem to hold the opinion that the solution is related to remedial activity to improve student skills and did not support changes in teaching methods. An interesting perspective on the problem of barriers to institutional commitment to change is provided by McLaughlin et al (1998) who argue for making student retention a strategic activity, recognising the nature of HE institutions and their cultures ultimately have to be changed.

Most of the changes at Huddersfield University Business School have been driven from front line staff committed to addressing these issues. We recognise that this is an unusual approach, but the clear benefit was that of commitment and a real desire to change for the better. Over time we were able to present findings to those responsible for leading change, and have received full support of departmental management. In fact this was key in enabling some of the more controversial changes. In some cases they required something of an initial leap of faith given the extent and nature of the proposed changes, although throughout these decisions have been supported by early, very solid indicative data and theory.

CONCLUSIONS

We have presented here our experience of addressing the retention and progression problems in a single department within a post-1992 university. Making use of both commonly suggested solutions such as skills support and induction activities, and also what we have termed "structural" approaches, we have observed through the collection of relevant operational level data, and through both anecdotal, and formal feedback the relative impacts on retention and progression. In the first year of the combined approach, we saw a fairly dramatic improvement in student performance. We attribute this improvement directly to the two new structural initiatives that were first implemented at this time, i.e. changing the teaching delivery structure and pro-active use of a student tracking and support system, along with additional impetus from the on-going improvements in skills support provision.

Additionally, we have briefly discussed some of the problems we faced in both implementing and administering many of these initiatives. We acknowledge that much of the "evidence" is anecdotal, but are equally convinced that the experiences and opinions expressed are representative, echoing the concerns expressed in the literature relating to the structural and cultural barriers to change in Higher Education.

At an operational level, the process of collecting and collating detailed data has in itself highlighted several pervasive issues, in particular the nature, timing, and reasons for students withdrawing. The student support information system already holds a substantial amount of information that has yet to be fully interrogated. What has worked for us, may not necessarily work for other courses or programmes, and we feel further research in this area is required at the micro-level to explore in more detail what trends we can effectively monitor and the best ways of dealing with this new management information to inform departmental and institutional decision-making and more specifically, to enable truly individualised, customer-focussed student support. To this end, there now needs to be a period of reflection and further experimentation with the new systems and processes that we have at our disposal, with a view to establishing and sharing best practice in this area within our institution and further afield.

Currently we are about to enter a new academic year, and for the first time we are doing so confident that our department is as close as it has ever been to being fit for purpose. We accept the nature of our students as being largely non-traditional, but take the view that irrespective of their experience, ability, skill level, race or whatever they all have a right to exploit the potential that they each have as individuals, and it is our responsibility to provide the environment to facilitate it.

Susan Mackie (2001) neatly sums up the vital nature of the responsibility that we have as educators:

> "All students arrive with some level of commitment and an intention to complete their course of study, it is the concern that by the beginning of the second term we succeed for some, in turning this "expectant hope" into "fears realised" and may have failed to exploit the potential within that initial commitment"

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Appendix: Table 1 – Huddersfield Project Summary Data 2002-2005

	2002/03			2003/04			2004/05			2005/06		
Total recruited	107			113			95			116		
Number/percentage of those recruited who withdrew	12	11.2%		14	12.4%		15	15.8%		17	14.7%	
Students completing all assessment	95			99			80			99		
Students progressing/% progression/%retention	80	84.2%	74.8%	74	74.75%	65.5%	74	92.5%	77.9%	92	92.9%	79.3%
Students not progressing	15			25			6			7		
Repeat student analysis												
Number/percentage of those recruited who are repeating	7	6.5%		9	8.0%		13	13.7%		5	4.3%	
Number/percentage of repeat students who withdrew	4	57.1%		4	44.4%		7	53.8%		3	60.0%	
Total recruited (excluding repeat students)	100			104			82			111		
Number/percentage of those recruited who withdrew	8	8.0%		10	9.6%		8	9.8%		14	12.6%	
Withdrawal analysis												
Male. Numer/percent/cohort percentage	9	75.0%	59.8%	9	64.3%	69.9%	11	73.3%	61.1%	12	70.6%	65.5%
Female Numer/percent/cohort percentage	3	25.0%	40.2%	5	35.7%	30.1%	4	26.7%	41.1%	5	29.4%	34.5%
Living at home	8	66.7%	59.8%	10	71.4%	60.2%	10	66.7%	52.6%	12	70.6%	57.8%
Uni Accomodation	4	33.3%	40.2%	4	28.6%	40.7%	5	33.3%	47.4%	5	29.4%	40.5%
First generation in family to attend University										13	76.5%	62.9%
Parents attended University										4	23.5%	37.1%

	Attendance	average ma	Fail rate	Attendance	average ma	Fail rate	Attendance	average ma	Fail rate	Attendance	average ma	Fail rate
Accounts (3 x class test, final 2 hour exam)	56%	43	21%	56%	45	29%	68%	56	11%	71%	48	9%
Operations (Written assignment, final 2 hour exam)	55%	44	20%	61%	46	18%	74%	56	2%	76%	54	2%
Economics (4 x class test, final individual presentation)	68%	50	5%	69%	52	17%	80%	55	2%	85%	53	1%
Introduction to Business (Written assignment, group present	59%	55	4%	62%	52	24%	66%	55	6%	67%	55	3%
Managing information (Written assignmnet, final 2 hour exar	55%	48	26%	54%	54	23%	65%	52	10%	67%	53	8%
Average all modules	59%	48	15%	60%	49.8	22%	71%	54.8	6%	73%	52.6	5%