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A good beginning makes a good ending. Facilitating an effective transition into higher education



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Overview

- Transition into HE: What are the issues?
- *What works? Student retention and success programme*: Improving student engagement, belonging, retention and success.
- Causes of early withdrawal and characteristics of effective interventions.
- Examples of effective transition activities.
- Checklist of effective practice.

Transition into HE: Student voices

- "I knew the campus, I'd been here many times... but, the reality of coming was scary... I didn't know what to expect, and there were so many youngsters all seeming to know what they were doing." (Mature student, University of Hull)
- "Anyone that says they're not scared is lying because there is that fear. Everyone has those giant fears of am I going to be liked, am I going to make friends, how am I going to feel living away from home... ... you know... you're afraid of everything, but you've got to grow up some time" (Young male, first year student, Aston University).

Student voices

- I was worried about like getting on with other people and fitting in... I wasn't worried about the work or anything, it was just fitting in. (2nd Year female student, Aston University)
- "Because I'm a single parent I literally come to University to study, I don't have the luxury of having a social life at University because I've got family commitments." (Mature, local student, University of Sunderland)

Transition is challenging: Hannah's Maths' Class



○ $38 + 8 = 48$

○ $43 + 3 = 43$

○ $27 + 6 = 36$

○ $15 - 2 = 15$

○ $56 - 6 = 54$

Factors contributing to a poor transition - and withdrawal

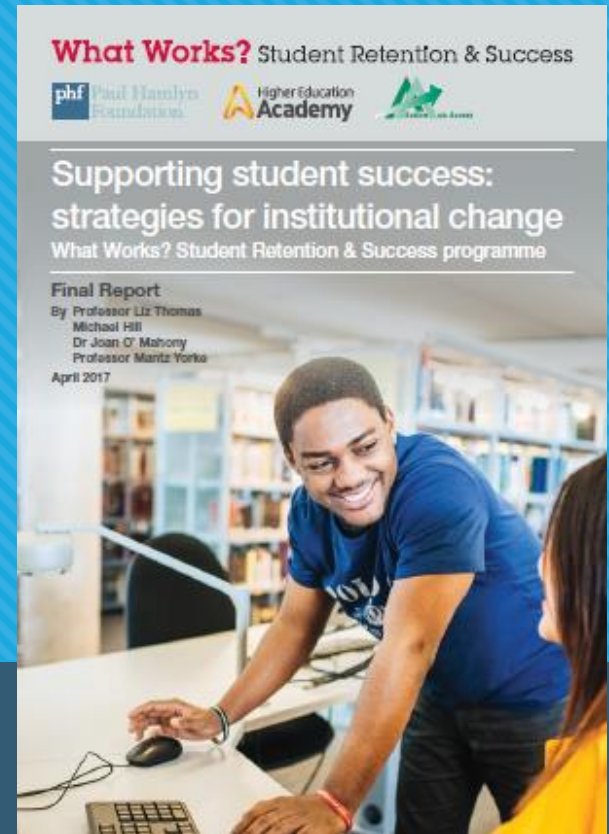
- Preparation for higher education.
- Institutional and course match.
- Academic issues.
- Lack of integration and engagement.
- Personal issues and circumstances.

What works? Student retention and success

Phase 1



Phase 2



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What works? Student retention and success

- NAO (2007) and PAC (2008): Lack of progress and lack of evidence about what works to improve retention in HE.
- £1 million (Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE) to support 7 projects involving 22 HEIs to identify, evaluate and disseminate effective practice.
- The primary purpose of the programme is to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation about the most effective practices to ensure high continuation and completion rates.
- 2012-16 working with 13 HEIs and 43 discipline teams to improve retention and attainment – and research the process and outcomes.
- The aim was to both extend knowledge about what works, and to develop understanding about how to implement change in complex organisations.

Key messages

- At the heart of student retention and success is a **strong sense of belonging in HE for all students**. This is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in.
- The **academic sphere is the most important site** for nurturing participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging. This puts high quality **inclusive student-centred learning and teaching** at the heart of effective student retention and success.
- In order to maximise the success of all students a **whole institution approach** is required, underpinned by evidence and with a sufficient timeframe.

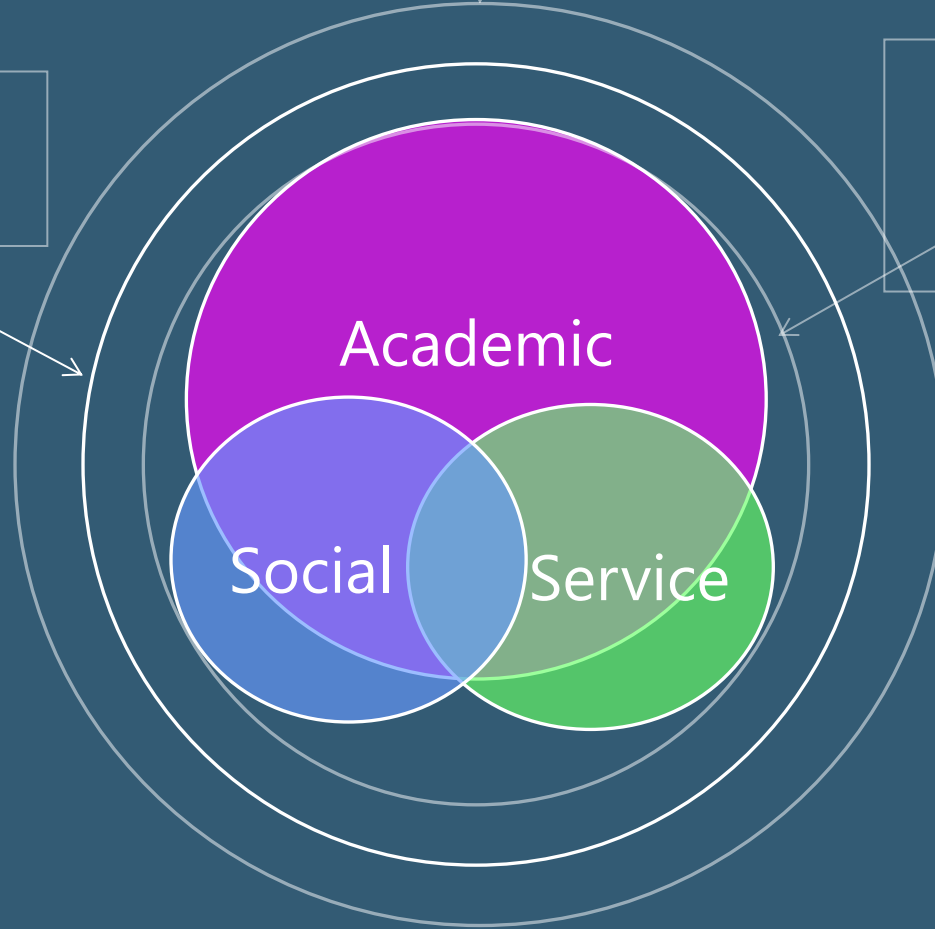
Student belonging is an outcome of...

- Supportive **peer relations**.
- Meaningful **interaction between staff and students**.
- Developing **knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners.
- An HE experience which is **relevant to interests and future goals.**"

Institutional management
and co-ordination

Staff capacity
building

Student
capacity
building

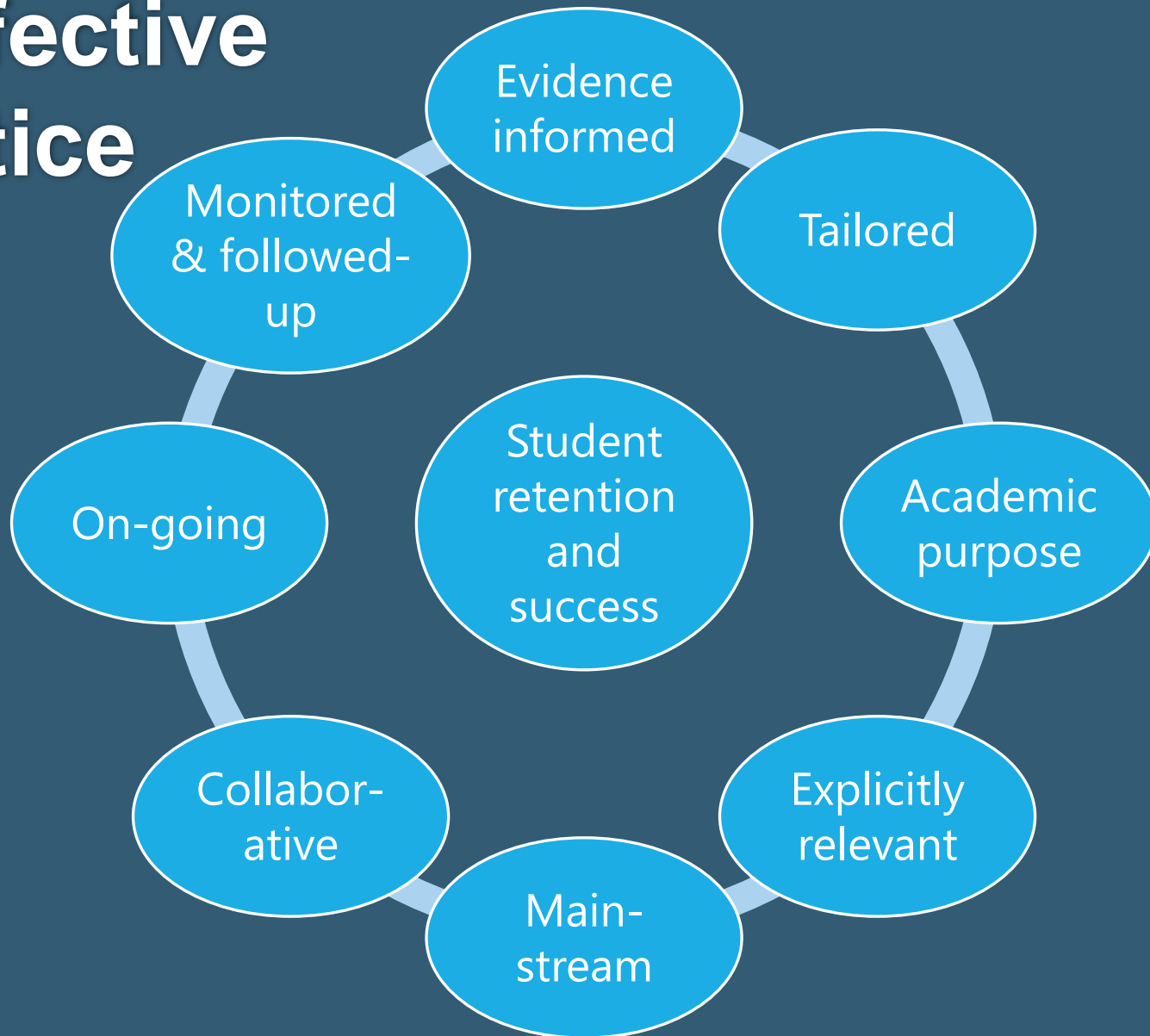


Early engagement extends into HE and beyond

Characteristics of effective interventions and approaches



Revised features of effective practice



Engaging students early

"I missed Freshers' Week, lots of pieces of paper with information, but [service availability] should be there, it should be reinforced on notice-boards or whatever".
(Female student).

Engaging all students

Some students face additional challenges with engagement. These groups include:

- International students
- Students with disabilities
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning students
- Students from minority religious groups
- Racial/ethnic minority students
- Gender minority students in different contexts
- Commuter/part-time/transfer/returning students
- Low-income and first-generation students.

Differential engagement and belonging: WW?2 survey

- Male students tend to be less engaged than their female peers.
- Older students (aged 20 and above) tend to be more engaged than younger students.
- White British students tend to exhibit a stronger sense of 'belongingness' than other respondents.
- Students who are not relatively disadvantaged by their circumstances tend to exhibit a stronger sense of 'belongingness' than those whose circumstances are more disadvantageous (including travelling to study, care responsibilities and limited access to a quiet place where they can do academic work).

The role of the curriculum

"...curriculum is what all students have in common, irrespective of their diversity, and is within our institutional control..."

The concern is that, if we do not harness and centralise the curriculum in the student experience, student take-up of our otherwise disparate and piecemeal efforts to support their FYE (first year experience) is left to chance. In the face of increasing diversity, equal opportunity for success delivered through the curriculum is within our institutional control and, quite simply, is our legal and moral responsibility.

(Kift et al 2010, p12-14)

Effective interventions

Most effective transition interventions **combine** these roles:

- Providing information
- Informing expectations
- Developing academic skills
- Building social capital
- Nurturing a sense of belonging

T-shirt induction activity

Implementation	Fun, semi-structured approach to group formation during induction in engineering
Mainstream	Activity takes place as part of academic induction for all level 1 students.
Proactive	All students participate.
Relevant	It is led by senior lecturer as part of the course. Groups then undertake projects.
Well-timed & appropriate media	During first week. Emphasis is on forming groups rather than providing information.
Collaborative	Promotes peer interaction and group working. Structured to promote mixing.
Monitored*	Qualitative feedback and review of data. Are non-participants followed up?

T-shirt induction

Outcomes	Surveys and focus groups with students and analysis of institutional data
Peer relations	Groups continued to work and socialise together one year later (58%)
Interaction with staff*	Opportunity to get to know a key member of staff.
Developing capacity	Students help each other (44% reported receiving help)
Relevant to current/future goals*	Group working in the curriculum, and relevant to engineering employment.
Sense of belonging	Created a belonging always or mostly (81%)
Retention & success	Better retention rates year on year (85-94%) & compared to other engineering schools.

Student voices

- "...it kind of makes...you don't just feel like one individual person on a course, it is kind of like you are in a conglomerate of people kind of thing...I think it does definitely make you feel part of the group or part of something within the year group rather than just one lone person."
- "First year is bad because you don't know anyone...if you don't set up the design group you have got to make friends, where are you going to make friends kind of thing....well you wouldn't usually....and if it was all individual work. You have to stick around to do the work and obviously if it is group work you are forced to meet people....".
- "...I think if you are part of the kind of group then if, if you are going to drop out then... or if you are struggling academically then you have got people there to support you as well".

Local field trip, Tourism

Implementation	Compulsory local field trips during induction
Mainstream	Part of academic induction for all level 1 students.
Proactive	Compulsory so all students participate.
Relevant	Helps students get to know the local area and is relevant to their study.
Well-timed & appropriate media	At the start of the year. Practical learning activity.
Collaborative	Involves programme staff and students work in groups.
Monitored*	Are non-participants followed up?

Local field trip, Tourism

Outcomes	Focus groups with students and analysis of institutional data
Peer relations	Students got to know each other and support each other.
Interaction with staff	Students got to know members of staff.
Developing capacity	Provided students with experiences to inform studying.
Relevant to current/future goals	Field trips referred to and used in first year curriculum.
Sense of belonging	Created a sense of belonging even for local students.
Retention & success	Progression remained constant (82-86%) despite doubling of cohort.

Student voices

- Local students felt isolated and that students in accommodation were better integrated: "It's mostly all the halls, like everyone staying in halls and then local people" .
- Students felt that the field trip "strengthens the whole group on a social basis" and this in turn "created a positive environment within the class" .
- "I feel more part of the group than before, which makes my course easier because I can ask anyone in my course if I've got any difficulties."

Problem-based learning in groups

Implementation	Core level 1 course using problem-based learning in groups of 8 students.
Mainstream	This is part of mainstream curriculum.
Proactive	All students participate, and group work is assessed.
Relevant	Relevant to current learning and team working in employment.
Well-timed & appropriate media	During first week. Emphasis is on forming groups rather than providing information.
Collaborative	Uses the academic sphere to facilitate social integration. Staff work with groups of 8 students.
Monitored*	Qualitative feedback and review of data.

Problem-based learning in groups

Outcomes	Surveys and focus groups with students and analysis of institutional data
Peer relations	Students worked in groups outside of the classroom and made friends.
Interaction with staff*	Opportunity to get to know staff in small groups.
Developing capacity	Supported to work in groups through coaching and other staff support.
Relevant to current/future goals.	Able to relate to own experiences and interests.
Sense of belonging	Created a sense of belonging.
Retention & success	Better retention rates year on year from 77% to 85%.

Student voices

- "I made [friends] through my seminars, really. I got four really good friends, and I've just clicked with them straight away, and then we sit together in lectures and stuff. And now I'm working on this project with them and we've been meeting up outside of Uni and stuff."
- "[...]I like that you can work together and somebody can bring a piece of information that you've never heard of, and you can bring something that somebody else has never heard of, and then you can swap them and find out how they found it and what's in the research. I like that."

Fundraising, Childhood Studies

Implementation	Collaborative fundraising for children's charities.
Mainstream	Initially small scale fundraising in class.
Proactive	Activities chosen to maximise engagement, including of mature students with children.
Relevant	Children's charities selected to be relevant to curriculum area.
Well-timed & appropriate media	Throughout the year. Promoted in class by staff.
Collaborative	Students work together. This has evolved to larger scale activities outside of the class.
Monitored*	Not formally.

Fundraising, Childhood Studies

Outcomes	Interviews and focus groups with students and staff and analysis of institutional data
Peer relations	Students are spending more time on campus and working together across levels.
Interaction with staff	Students got to know members of staff.
Developing capacity	Provided students with experiences to inform studying.
Relevant to current/future goals	Shared interest in children, and likely to want to be employed in related sector.
Sense of belonging	Created cohort identity, sense of belonging.
Retention & success	Improved attainment. Progression from level 1 to level 2 up from 85% to 93%.

Student voices

- "...most of the students aren't spending enough time at the University, they were coming in and going out and we want to encourage more social integration and more of a sense of community." (Staff)
- "They really do try and get you to do it. They do lots to get people involved. The lecturer who runs it stops you and questions us on why you're not doing it." (Mature student)
- "Sense of belonging has been increased and you can develop a better relationship with teachers as well as other students. It also shows that we generally care about children and that is why we do the Childhood Studies course." (Student)

Sports Science, Yr 1, Induction

- Context: 200 1st years, $\frac{3}{4}$ single honours, already offering an interactive induction programme, including meeting tutor.
- Description: Introduced social activities and pre-entry website, a 'to do list', research methods and study skills module, weekly 'settled score'.
- Impact (researched by students): Liked activities that were interactive and academic relevance. Non-timetabled social activities did not work well. Limited use of pre-entry website. Continuation rates went up.
- Lessons: Use the research evidence; academic relevance; students-as-researchers; problems created by institutional blocks.

Inclusive assessments, range of disciplines

- Context: Institutional research on disparities in attainment.
- Description: Improving quality of assignment briefs; and students work in groups to unpack the assignment brief and to discuss these with their lecturers.
- Impact: Increase in attainment, above 50% and 70%, fewer non-submissions; reduced ethnicity attainment gap.
- Lessons: A research-informed approach, champions in faculties, implementation owned locally, value of evidence.

Identifying students who are not engaging

- Students who are not engaging are at risk of withdrawal. Identifying and following up students who are not engaging improves retention and success (Thomas 2012).
- Indicators of engagement:
 - Attendance at formal lectures/seminars/labs.
 - Library usage.
 - Accessing online learning.
 - Participating co-curricular activities such as personal tutoring, peer learning, academic skills development.
 - Submission of course work.
 - Performance, especially early assessments.

Conclusions

- **Prioritise developing student capacity for transition through social engagement with an academic purpose.**
- 'This seminal initial stage of the first few weeks at university can have a substantial effect on students' eventual socialization into university culture and therefore their engagement with educationally effective practices' (Vinson et al. 2010, p133).

Conclusions

- **Developing engagement and belonging is important in all transitions.**
- 'Those who feel at home, who take part in extra-curricular activities, and who feel connected with fellow students and teachers, are more inclined to persist with their studies. Without social integration, it is more difficult to persist, and ultimately to graduate' (Severiens & Schmidt, 2009, p.60).

Reflective checklist

1. To what extent is transition work focused on social engagement and developing social capital (contacts or networks to draw on), rather than on provision of information?
2. How early are you starting to build meaningful relationships with and between students, so that they know who to ask if they need information or support?
3. To what extent do your transition activities have an overt academic purpose? Could the academic element be increased? In what ways are academic members of staff involved in transition activities?
4. Do you have sufficient structured opportunities for students to get to know members of staff? Is this sufficient to enable students to get to know staff and be able to ask for information or support?

Reflective checklist

5. To what extent do pre- and post-entry transition activities facilitate students getting to know peers from the same course or programme? Is there a structured approach to encourage mixing outside of their comfort zones?
6. Does your transition programme make the benefits of academic and social engagement explicit to students and provide them with skills and opportunities to engage?
7. To what extent do transition activities build on and relate to students diverse interests, experiences and backgrounds?
8. In what ways is the relevance of the course or programme of study to students' future aspirations made explicit both pre- and post-entry?

Thank you

- Thank you for listening.
- Please get in touch if you would like to discuss anything:
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Evidence base/references

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