A Multi- disciplinary approach to retention and drop out: A response to institutional concerns. Paper for Access and Retention: experiences of non-traditional learners in Higher Education- 7-8 April 2011

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<u>Abstract</u>

UK Higher Education Institutions have recently been affected by policy changes which requires explicit changes to non-completion standards and the introduction of financial consequences. Addressing non-completion remains a priority within universities, with institutions required to report on retention and the student experience and not just access issues (HEFCE, 2009). Research suggests that there has been a lack of progress in improving retention between 2002 and 2007 (NAO, 2007). Therefore, it is essential for universities to take a more holistic approach to tackling retention and dropout, especially with 'non-traditional' groups. The student experience and integration into the academic and social communities of Higher Education is a priority if students are to achieve and complete. This paper will draw upon empirical evidence of issues surrounding the retention of 'non-traditional' students in order to demonstrate functional approaches to fostering completion and academic success.

As a university committed to widening participation and social justice, London Metropolitan University is made up of almost fifty percent 'non-traditional' students. Yorke (2001) highlights that roughly two-thirds of all university dropouts happen throughout or by the end of the first year of university. Research suggests that effective transition and induction in the first six weeks of term are fundamental factors in promoting student success; ensuring confidence with the rigors of academic life and developing a peer community are achieved.

In response to this, an innovative social model of transitional programming has been developed at London Metropolitan University. This multi-disciplinary approach seeks to address transitional problems for first year undergraduate students by engaging them in; positive discourse, academic activities, curricula and various socio-cultural events. Programming is structured to promote a sense of community amongst students and staff, the enhancement of student learning and fostering achievement. Using evidence gathered from focus groups, questionnaires and interviews, this paper will critically appraise the experiences of first year BA (Hons) Education Studies students during the first six weeks of term; highlighting transitional issues which will inform new retention models within the institution. The paper will also examine an institutional perspective on retention strategies that addresses these issues.

Introduction

Current Higher Education (HE) policy highlights that universities need to address student retention and dropout. To tackle this issue some universities are introducing transition programmes. HE policy has created a series of challenges for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), through financial constraints and administrative reporting processes. HEIs are fully accountable financially for students for the duration of the student life cycle and are penalised for enrolled students dropping out or failing to progress. Under the current system this can equate to approximately £20,000 of lost income for every student who does not graduate. Philips (2006) agrees: *"With an average of 14% drop-out, approximately 44,000 individuals per year will enter higher education but will not complete their course." (p15)*. The student experience is a highly complex area, especially for non-traditional students who pose additional challenges.

In the context of this paper it is important to highlight what we mean by non-traditional or widening participation students, as this terminology is also often referred to as under-represented groups all encompassed under the umbrella of widening participation cohorts. Widening Participation is defined as:

'Widening participation is taken to mean extending and enhancing access to HE experiences of people from so-called under-represented and diverse subject backgrounds, families, groups and communities and positively enabling such people to participate in and benefit from HE. Widening participation is also concerned with diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and social background in particular HE disciplines, modes and institutions" Watson (2006).

Yorke (1999) identifies themes and areas of support which are considered vital for institutional focus and student needs to resolve retention issues. Within these themes, timings of intervention was identified as a factor of importance. The 'first' year of the student life cycle is regarded as the pivotal point in terms of impacting student dropout, as evidence suggests the highest number of students withdraw at this stage.

Retention challenges in HE are highly complex and focus on the internal and external policy environment of the institution and the individual. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how student retention can be enhanced by early intervention which is embedded in the core curriculum and student experience. The paper does not focus on the reasons why students dropout per se, rather explores practical explanations of what makes an effective transition programme. Transition to University has been expressed in the academic literature as being a major component to the success of retention and completion of students, in particular ensuring students are equipped with the appropriate HE study skills as well as developing a sense of community between staff and students. This paper is concerned with identifying how the early phases of the student life cycle can be enhanced to improve levels of student achievement and

retention. Working with this unique demographic in HE requires innovation, collaboration and cooperation amongst students and academics

The literature clearly identifies four key areas that are relevant to this paper. These key areas are; student experience in the first few weeks of university and links to achievement and retention, sound pedagogy and transition programming, peer-mentoring as a tool for achievement and establishing a concept of cultural capital to harness academic success.

Rationale for the study

The purpose of this action research paper was to explore through a pilot study effective transition and retention interventions to support the first year undergraduate students on the BA Education Studies programme. Although small scale in its infancy, the vision was to present a model which could be used as an exemplar of excellent practice and support the needs at a localised course level. Practice evolved from highlighting an acute student retention issue which affects many HEIs and was a pertinent concern for senior management. The Widening Participation department worked with a core team to implement the programme.

The aims of the transition pilot put in place to try and tackle these retention issues were as follows:

1. To support all new entrants onto the BA Education Studies Programme in the first six weeks of their studies in adapting to university life
2. To support all new entrants onto the BA Education Studies Programme in developing appropriate HE study-skills right from the first contact
3. To provide a platform to create a sense of community amongst students and staff
4. To provide an appropriate and effective IAG service prior to accessing the university.

The pilot consisted of six key themes; social networking, a 'one-stop shop' virtual learning environment, 'Learning Development Unit' integrated curriculum, personal advisor input, a mentoring scheme and cross-curricular planning for core modules. The pilot identified two distinct cohorts, all fifty nine new first year students enrolled on the BA Education Studies programme and six-second year students who would be trained as mentors to pilot the project. A core team and steering group to implement the transition programme was also identified.

Methodology

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Multiple methods of data collection were used for this pilot. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected using triangulation. In the case of this study qualitative data was a primary method of collection with quantitative data used to inform and verify the qualitative, giving a more complete picture of the Transitions Pilot.

As the project is based entirely at the University, the site of the data collection was also London Metropolitan University. Certain aspects of the research were conducted in one of the classrooms that the Transition Pilot programme held mentoring meetings in the first six weeks of university. The evaluation used random sampling to select the participants for the research.

The peer mentors were trained by the department researcher in how to facilitate focus groups effectively and conducted the first focus groups. These groups sought to have a minimum of 8 participants and covered the whole transitions project. To make sure the participants felt free to talk honestly, mentors only facilitated groups that did not include their own mentees and all recordings and transcriptions were made anonymously.

The second focus group was with the mentors themselves and was conducted by members of the Transition Pilot team. The questions for both of these focus groups were informed by data collected and from questionnaires described below. The sample size of this group was significantly lower as there were only six mentors involved in the project. These focus groups in turn helped to interpret previously obtained quantitative results.

The final source of primary data used were questionnaires with the first year undergraduates on the programme.

Other sources of data collection include quantitative data reports on the frequency of online contact between mentors and mentees, analysing numbers of students using the mentoring scheme, interviews and quantitative data from the questionnaires and the University's records.

Some comparative data was used between the 2010/11 cohort who had been part of the transition pilot and the control group, the 2009/10 cohort who had no additional support during the early phases of their university experience.

Cohort analysis

 For the year 2010/11 London Metropolitan University's student cohort is officially made up of 48% non-traditional students according to HEFCE's (2010) definition, based on young higher education (HE) participation rates by ward (for young full-time undergraduates), or the proportion of 16-74 year-olds with a HE qualification by ward (for mature full-time and all part-time undergraduates), for the widening access allocation they define a student as young if they are under 21 on entry otherwise the student is defined as mature. The cohort for the pilot broadly

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reflected this, however, this particular BA Education Studies year group had a significantly higher proportion of females compared to males with 14 % male and 86% female students.

Key findings

Here are the initial key findings from the study:

- Peer mentoring has proved to be an effective tool to support 1st year students transition into University
- The programme has led to an increase in attendance in taught provision during the study compared to the 2009/10 cohort
- Analysis of assessment and attendance data suggests that the increased attendance in the 2010/11 cohort did not have a significant impact on the pass rate of semester 1
- The whole programme has had a significant impact on a positive transition for students in the cohort
- The pre-entry social networking with students had little impact on the transition of non-traditional students, however it could be beneficial if managed differently with more staff and student interaction
- The embedded pedagogy has had significant positive outcomes for students developing their academic literacies and supported other core modules
- Demonstrated that resource intensive models such as this require staff and management buy-in
- By developing a cohesive staff engagement framework a proactive problem-solving culture was enabled
- There is evidence to support transitional mentoring across all years of the academic life cycle

Discussion

Initial findings show that on the whole the pilot was successful with students feeling they had been supported throughout their first six weeks of university. Staff members involved felt they were more of a team and enjoyed working with others. Below we scrutinize the key findings in more depth as certain strands were deemed to be more successful than others for example peer mentoring.

Pre-entry Interventions

Social Networking

Pre-entry information and first impressions of the university and course infrastructure can have a significant impact on the smooth transition and induction of students. The social networking site Facebook was used as a mechanism to introduce new students to each other and the course and was the starting of creating a platform for developing a sense of community amongst peers and staff. Results show that take-up and interaction was low, however systemic processes were major contributory factors to the failure of this strand and feedback will inform better practice next year.

Induction and transition interventions

Transition programmes as a positive impact

A successful transition programme will address multiple aspects of integration into the academic and social communities of HE. It is evident from the literature that the transition to university, especially in the first few weeks, can affect the students' ability to achieve academically as well as inform their decision whether to continue with their studies or to drop-out of education. There is also evidence that most students make the decision to leave university within the first few weeks. Phillips, R (2006), confirms this theory stating that: *"Most counsellors working within universities will acknowledge that students are especially vulnerable at the start of their courses"* (p15). The findings from the study identify that 80% of the students felt supported during the first six weeks of term, some of the responses included:

"Coming to this university makes me realise that this is something I really want. I am capable and will succeed in achieving my goals"- Student A

"I was told it is a very scary place and that you have to find your way. But actually it is not like that"- Student B

Peer Mentoring

With reference to peer mentoring, many theorists agree that student voice is central to achievement within HE, (Thomas, L and Crosling G. 2007) and that mentoring can be an avenue for this. They also argue that good quality peer-mentoring can lead to academic achievement and progression within university. Solomon, L and Stuart, M. (2006) agree and discuss how growing research in the field of the learners' voice highlights the need for students' experiences and background before HE to be taken into account when researching. *"if learning is to be successful, it is learners' own voices that need to be heard. ......If we are to provide appropriate learning experiences in the future, then it is essential that we listen to and learn from learners themselves."* (p.2). The mentoring component in the BA Education Studies Transition

programme attempted to address this, with mentors regularly informing staff of student experiences, questions and issues.

The mentors are seen as another avenue for the mentees voices to be heard. Phillips, R . (2006) went further in linking student voice and peer mentoring by comparing universities with peer mentoring and those without. The research indicated:

*"that students at the Non Peer Mentoring University displayed a decrease in self-esteem and social support from Time One (five days into university) to Time Two (end of the first semester).The students who had experience of a peer mentor had higher levels of university support (including staff); were better adapted to university; and were less likely to want to withdraw." (*p15)

He went on to highlight the crucial point that a peer mentor can make or break a student's experience in the first few weeks of university.

As discussed, initial feedback from the students suggests that the most successful aspect of the Transition programme was the peer mentoring scheme. The matching of the mentor-mentee groups was strategic, taking into account the cohort dynamics and mentor experience, for example mature students were matched with a mature mentor, joint honours students were grouped together with a joint honours mentor and returning mothers were again paired with mentors that had a similar experience. The mentors had been identified from the 2nd year cohort of the programme with tutor recommendations. The mentors were identified for their academic ability, enthusiasm for the course, leadership skills and general attitude to university. This matching, particularly of non-traditional students, proved to be effective as mentees reported that the felt they could easily relate to their mentor because they valued their experience and motivation to succeed. 61% of students reported that meetings with their mentor helped them settle into university life. Some student quotes included:

"She knew how we all felt and helped me realise it was not as scary as it seemed" - Student C

"They made me realise it was normal to feel lost and confused". - Student D

An interesting finding resulted from the mentor's focus group suggesting that transitional mentoring should take place across the different progression and transition points of the student life cycle. A common view was shared that having these kinds of peer-led mentoring interventions would enhance the learning trajectories of all students at challenging phases of the taught programme, for example graduates mentoring third years students on the challenges and expectations of the dissertation. Because the programme was a pilot and the aims were initially to support students during the first six weeks, the duration of the peer mentoring theme was restricted to six weeks. However, given the success and the feedback from both mentees and

mentors, there is serious argument for extending the duration span of the mentoring scheme and the dynamics of the interface sessions. Recommendations include to evolve the theme up to the first assessment and beyond for the whole academic year. Resource implications, particularly on the mentors' time commitments, will ultimately have an impact on these developments.

Impact on attendance and attainment

Attendance during the first six weeks of term was monitored and compared to previous cohort data. Evidence suggests that student attendance has been far better in 2010/11 than 2009/10, which is very encouraging and could go some way to suggesting that they enjoy coming to the lectures, as was supported in the responses to the questionnaires and they feel part of a community of learning. Further research will be needed in this area to see if the two really do link.
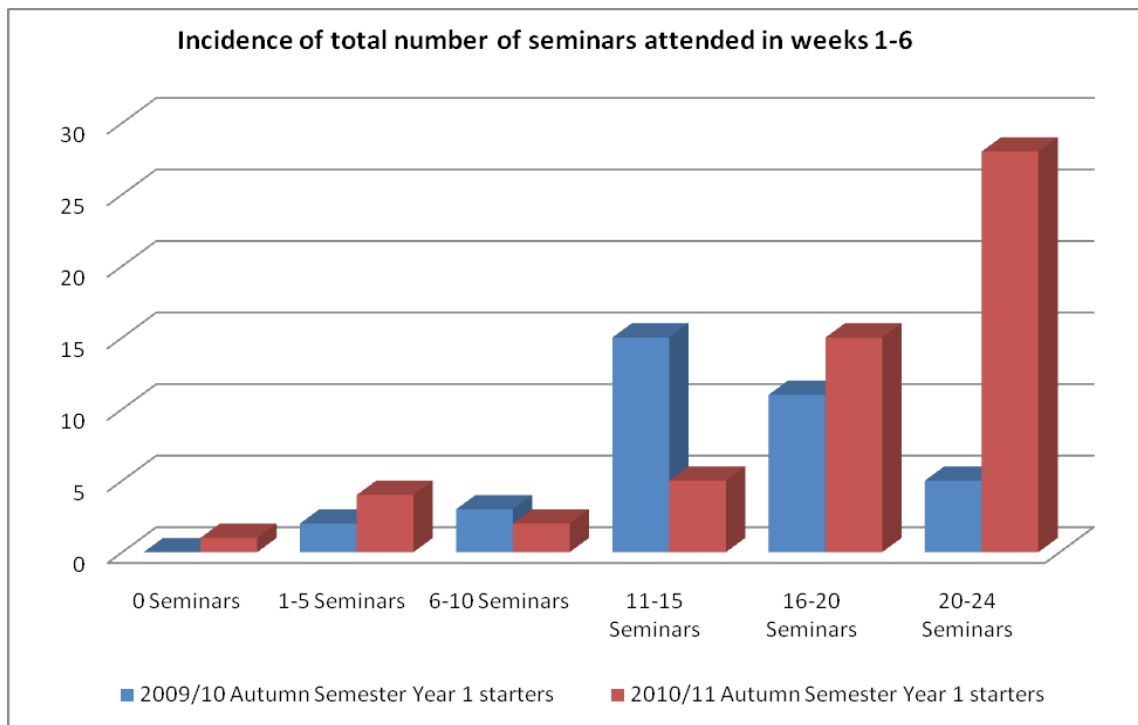
Marshall, C (2011). Graph to show attendance in year 1 semester A for BA Education Studies 2009/10 and 2010/11.

Even though students have definitely been attending classes more this year in their first term than last year's cohort, after the first term it does not seem to be strongly rewarded with achievement in terms of the number of modules they have passed. Even though it is clearly evident from the statistics that more people have been passing more modules this year, 73% of 2010/11 cohort passed three or more semester one modules compared to 66% in 2009/10. It is too early to tell if

it correlates to dropout and retention in the first year, however this will be investigated at the end of this semester.
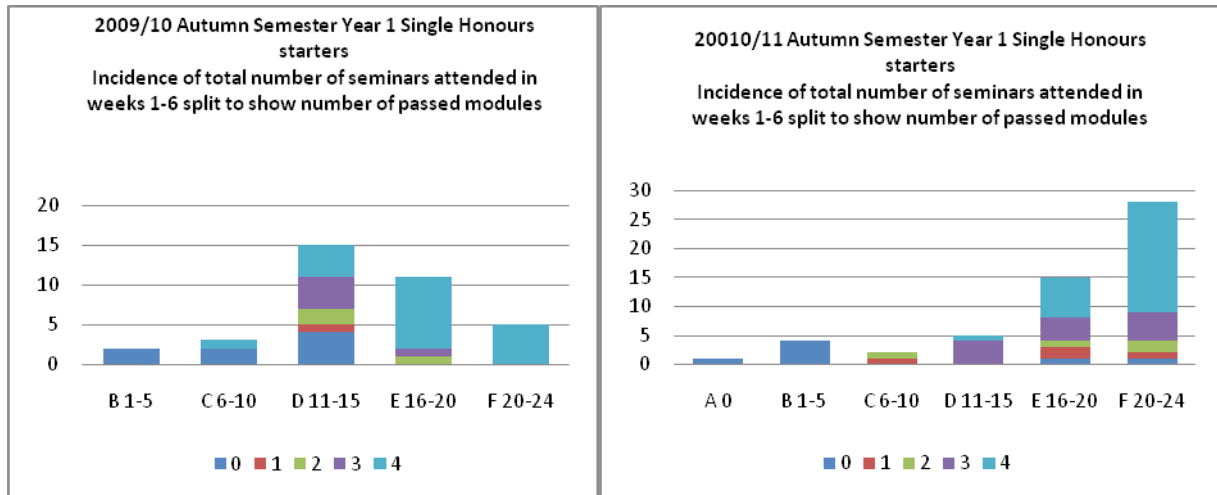
Marshall, C (2011). Graphs to show the comparison between 2009/10 cohort and 2010/11 cohort of BA Education studies 1st year Semester A results.

Pedagogy

Wingate. (2007) notes that other Researchers such as Tinto, (1993); Edward, (2003) see clear and successful transition programming as a way of supporting student achievement and progression. (p391)

"Clearly, more interactive and student-centred induction activities that help students to bond with peers, to meet their lecturers and feel accepted by them, and to gain a sense of belonging are needed…….and that learning requirements at university may be different from students' previous learning experience".

Thomas, L and Crosling G. (2007) concur that sound pedagogy is also important in shaping students' experiences of the transition to university:

"Development and re-shaping of the learning and teaching programme in new and perhaps innovative ways can assist students with social and academic engagement, and we know that these are important factors in students' decisions to continue with their studies or drop out" (p2).

After interviewing the staff involved in the programme as well as the students participating, it has been noted that there seems to have been a shift in the 'balance of power' in the classroom. Students felt that their voices are being "heard" and report that they feel that all lecturers on the module are very approachable. In turn some lecturers noted that the students speak up more in

class and are learning to question and critically appraise. Lecturers have noted that this change has made the feeling of community stronger and the interaction between students and lecturers has strengthened. Students have cited this as a reason for understanding the academic rigor necessary for higher education, but in a way that they have been able to apply through understanding of the academic. This is a move from the lecturer led classroom empowering students to construct knowledge. It was evident that cross curricular planning encouraged collaboration and the sharing of good practice in the classroom.

Another area that members of the pilot team felt shaped the pedagogy of the programme was the feedback sessions with the mentors. The mentors would feed back in confidence to the widening participation team who would then brief the course leader. Issues would then be discussed with the whole team if necessary and would decide what actions if any needed to take place. Many topics were covered but small changes such as putting a microphone in a classroom so everybody could hear and engage made a difference to the students.

Staff Integration, development and good practice interventions

The impact on resources for the programme

The implementation of this multi-disciplinary approach to supporting students through transition is resource intensive and requires 'buy in' from course staff as well as senior management support. However, the programme was designed around the knowledge base and strengths of the staff involved and was driven by a small core delivery team, which included an understanding of the issues of the student cohort which reflected how the provision was managed. It is important to stress that the model, although easily replicable, should be determined at a local course level and could adopt a piecemeal approach equally as taking all aspects on the programme from the start, whilst remembering that the programme as a whole has made a positive impact. All staff within the course team embraced the aims and merits of the programme as it gave them a sense of collective ownership and responsibility for delivering a quality led student experience. The students appreciated the intensive and supportive nature of the programme, with many commenting on how approachable and accessible academics seemed to be.

Much of the resource intensive delivery was at the start of the programme and therefore as a result much of the practice has now been embedded into course and pedagogical structures. Some aspects of the model are easily replicable, for example transitional peer mentoring and could provide a solution to maximising resource. Evidence suggests that the mentoring aspect of the programme was the most significantly positive element of the model, which gives rise to exporting this to other courses allowing provision to be more cost effective. Economies of scale could make a difference to the resource intensive processes for example recruitment and training of the mentors as well as assigning more central roles to members of the course team.

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Staff engagement strand

Staff engagement has been a major factor in creating a sense of cohort identity. This model was the first time staff on the BA Education Studies programme have worked on a project as a team and challenges did arise. These however were easily overcome because everyone involved believed in the idea of the project and committed their time and energy to it. Senior management support played a crucial role in the participation of other members of staff and with everyone aware of the importance of poor retention rates staff were engaged. Some staff however where more actively involved in the project than others.

Staff felt that working as a team from different areas of the university was interesting for their own development and brought new expertise to the table. Lecturers, Associate Dean, the course leader, Widening Participation, the library, the Learning Development Centre, administrative staff and second year students all played an integral role to the running of the pilot. People who had not spoken before found out there were other areas they could work together and this in turn has lead to some collaborations for the future for further research, teaching and project work. Staff also enjoyed the fact that they were learning from other members of the team and working across functions in the university. This was a pilot however, so it would be interesting to see how staff in other disciplines aside from Education Studies would react to this model and if it could or would work in exactly the same way.

The course leader felt the pilot was an excellent way of building team rapport and a sense of a programme identity. It was also identified by senior management that this style of project management for a programme was new to many lecturers and it was a good way to improve their skills.

Conclusion

The holistic interventions introduced as part of this pilot study have raised pertinent questions at course level as to the degree of success a multi-disciplinary model can have to aid the integration and transition for all students into the academic and social communities of Higher Education. Some of the challenges at the start of the programme have meant that staff have ventured into new territory and embraced a new culture of supporting and dealing with students. Evidence has highlighted that students value the personalised 'student centred' approach, with a distinct shift of pedagogical practices away from traditional teacher-centred delivery. Academics at course level ultimately have the knowledge to support students through the early phases of their student experience, ensuring students are equipped with critical thought and study skills to succeed, however, without embedded practices and ethos to implement these structures, success may be limited.

The findings from this study have demonstrated that student transition and retention is a highly complex field to overcome, particularly when working with non-traditional groups, as different students will response to different interventions. This supports the concept of adopting a multi-disciplinary approach as it provides students with a holistic view of university life, allowing them to manage their transition at their own pace and gives a good grounding to the academic rigor and expectations involved in succeeding in this type of academic environment.

Following the success of this pilot, one of the recommendations will be to embed and implement this type of programme across the institution and as a 'flagship' retention and transition model. There is a clear acknowledgement that this was only a pilot on one course and therefore certain elements of the programme may not be readily transferable into all course structures and some courses will have different issues to others. However, a recommendation to senior management will be to develop the peer mentoring theme and rollout across the institution.

There is a clear remit at an institutional level to evolve a widening participation strategy that has a mutli-dimensional focus to its core business of supporting students. With changes to the funding formulas in HE post-2012, courses and departments will have increased demands made of them by students, wanting a high quality experience, therefore retention and transition approaches need to make an early impact. There will always be external factors affecting non-traditional learners ability to succeed and progress, however if internal systems are effective and sustainable, widening participation should not mean a fall in retention rates.

Acknowledgements

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