Paul Hamlyn Foundation

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND hefce

What works?
Student Retention and Success

Professor Liz Thomas

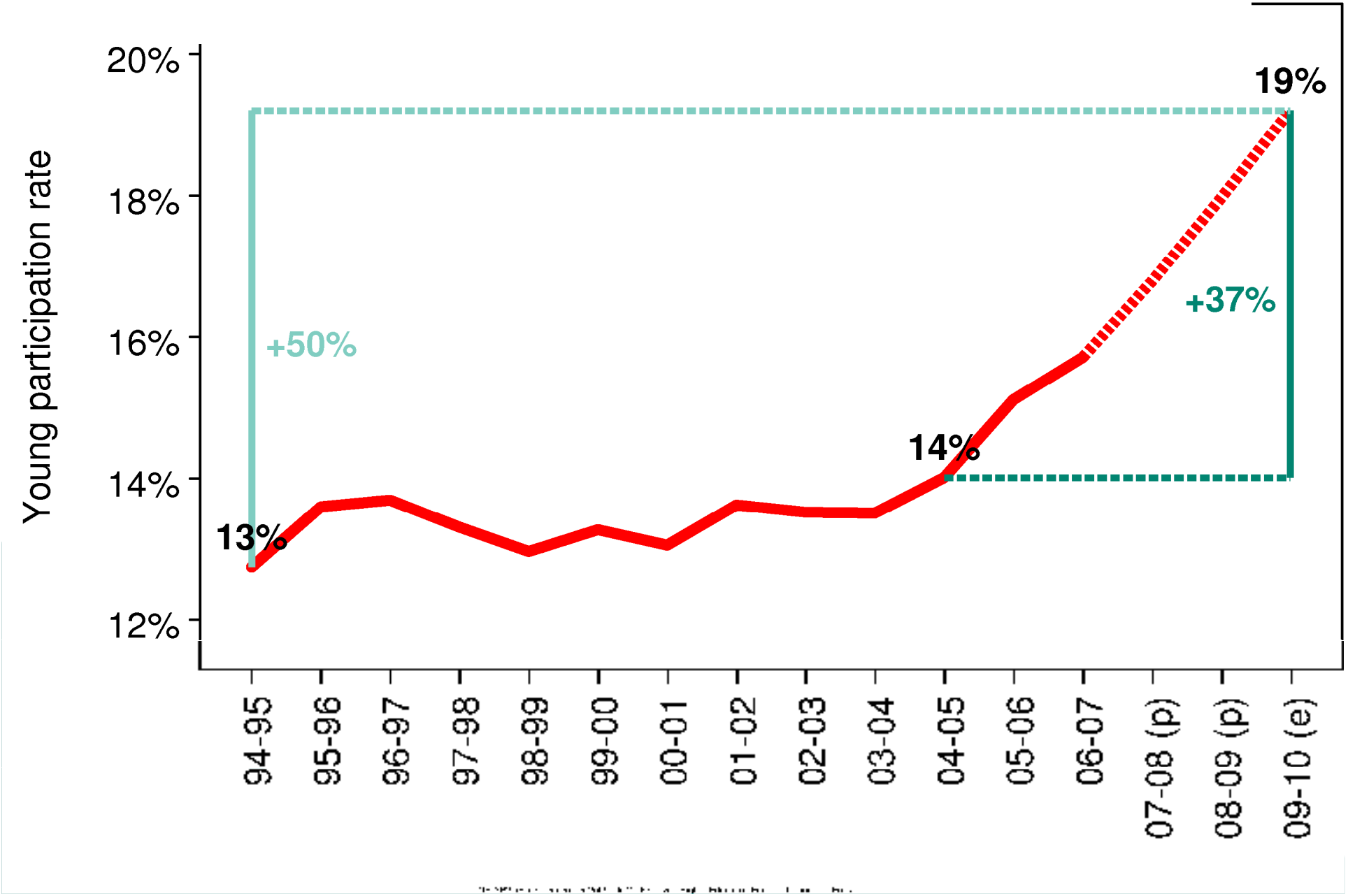
Action on Access

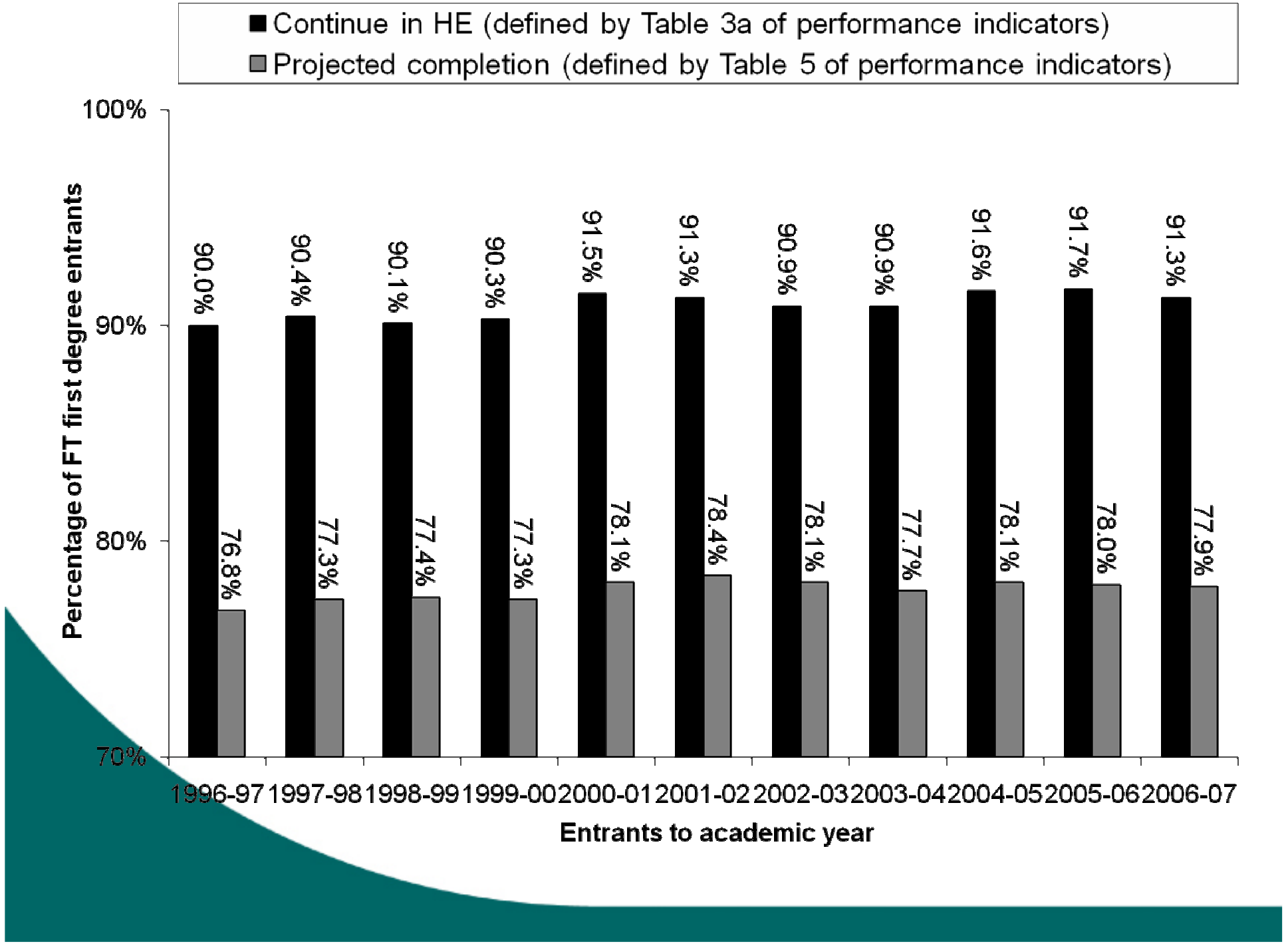
The Higher Education Academy

What has been achieved over the last 12 years

- Increased numbers of more diverse students
- Reduced unit funding
- Retention rates (continuation and completion) have remained relatively constant (NAO 2002, NAO 2007) since before this phase of WP began.
- Widespread commitment to WP and some evidence of transformative approach.

POLAR2 – most disadvantaged group




Continue in HE (defined by Table 3a of performance indicators)
Projected completion (defined by Table 5 of performance indicators)
100%
90%
80%
70%
Percentage of FT first degree entrants
90.0%
76.8%
90.4%
77.3%
90.1%
77.4%
90.3%
77.3%
91.5%
78.1%
91.3%
78.4%
90.9%
78.1%
90.9%
77.7%
91.6%
78.1%
91.7%
78.0%
91.3%
77.9%
1996-97
1997-98
1998-99
1999-00
2000-01
2001-02
2002-03
2003-04
2004-05
2005-06
2006-07
Entrants to academic year

Institutional commitment

There is a strong commitment to supporting students to be successful in HE in addition to widening access. Indeed, 117 HEIs talked of their retention strategies.

(Widening Participation Strategic Assessments: Report to HEFCE, March 2010)

“What Works?” Student retention and success

- NAO (2007) and PAC (2008): Lack of progress and lack of evidence about what works to improve student retention.
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE funded 7 projects to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation about effective strategies to improve continuation and completion in HE. (£1million).
- Support and co-ordination team to work with teams, undertaken analysis and disseminate findings to the sector.

What do we know?

1. Which students leave higher education.
2. Why students leave higher education.
3. Factors that improve retention.

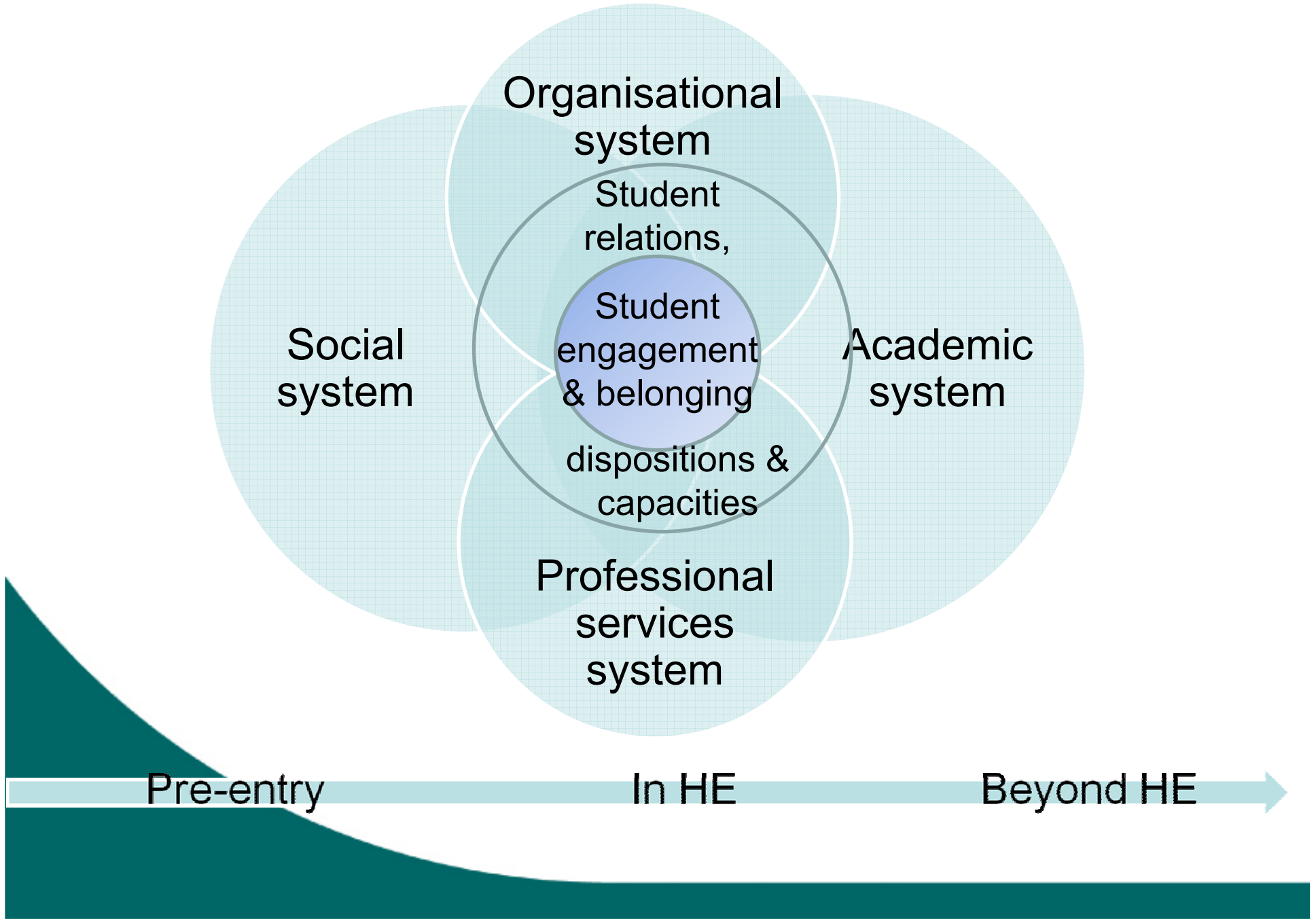
See student retention and success synthesis:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/EvidenceNet/Syntheses/wp_retention_synthesis.pdf

The Academy has commissioned a synthesis of US literature which will be available soon.

What don’t we know?

‘Most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation’ (Tinto, 2006).


Organisational system
Student relations,
Social system
Student engagement & belonging
Academic system
dispositions & capacities
Professional services system
Pre-entry
In HE
Beyond HE

Student engagement

- Active rather than passive, participants rather than recipients.
- Invest in and take responsibility for their learning and whole HE experience.
- Spend time with and learn from peers.
- Interact with and learn from staff.
- They know people and where to get information from.
- Feel connected with and a part of the institution (or course, programme, Faculty etc).
- Learning experience has meaning, rather than being purely instrumental.

The Classroom as a Key Site of Engagement

New student cohorts are likely to have less engagement in other spheres of the university:

- Local students (commuting and not living in university accommodation).
- Higher levels of dependency on “part-time” employment (hours and importance).
- Part-time, work-based and distance modes
- Additional responsibilities (childcare, relatives, and other social pressures).

Academic culture shock

Many students experience “academic culture shock” related to:

- Language and complexity and level of learning
- Learner autonomy / self-study
- New teaching and learning methods (lectures, seminars etc)
- Lack of interaction with staff

Language and complexity

"…the language they used and the structure of the teaching was a lot more in-depth and complicated, it felt a lot more adult". (Leonard, English University)

"When I did drop out it was mainly the teaching methods that were off putting coming from college to university. They were so suddenly academic that it was a real shocker!" (2nd year male first generation student)

Learner autonomy and self study

"I found the transition to university – in spite of me actually being really enthusiastic about it – really difficult… the work transition from being in class and being taught, to going away and doing it all yourself then having all the errors corrected at the end of the week, it's hard to adjust to. It took me about half a term to get into it properly."

"You have to be in the library, you have to be reading those books yourself. It was kind of quite difficult for me especially with the usual first year shenanigans you get up to living away from home and what not."

Unfamiliar teaching methods

"They just talk. That's about it, it's a lecture, you listen and take notes. When you take notes you forget what they are saying. When you go back to your notes you wonder what you have written down. You don't know whether to take notes or listen". (Female, first generation entrant who withdrew from university)

Lack of interaction with staff

"I didn't feel comfortable approaching lecturers and asking how I did some of the work. I didn't want to feel like an idiot". (Male, first generation working class entrant who withdrew from university)

"I found I could never really talk to the lecturers, there were so many people in our class. The lecturers were always busy doing something else. They never had time. There was always someone else talking to them". (Callum, Computer Science, Irish university. Withdrew during Semester 2)

What makes students feel like they belong academically?

Students identified the following issues as important:

- Knowing students names
- Kindness or other signs of friendship
- Being respected
- Inclusive learning and teaching strategies
- Collaborative learning

Thomas 2002

Learning and teaching priorities

1. Extending and integrating induction to make expectations explicit and develop academic skills.
2. Introducing diversity into the curriculum.
3. Mainstreaming interactive, student-centred learning and teaching.
4. Providing early formative assessment and feedback.
5. Inclusive assessment suitable for all students.
6. A proactive and integrated model of academic and pastoral support .

Induction

- Traditional welcome week provides lots of information, but does not engage students in making sense of the information.
- Instead induction should provide transparency and promote integration and engagement in the learning process and the HE environment.
- Induction can be extended, be relevant, be participatory and build on previous experiences of students, encourage social interaction, promote transparency, and be embedded in the programme of study.

Making learning relevant to students' lives

- Draw on examples that resonate with students experiences.
- Help students see how learning will help them to achieve their longer term aspiration.
- Include opportunities for placements, study abroad etc.
- New courses and curriculum, including but not limited to vocational and work-based learning.

  Accelerated and part-time provision

Student-centred active learning

- Students construct meaning by talking, listening, writing, reading and reflecting.
- Learning is relevant to students' lives – realistic problems or situations (e.g. problem-based or project-based learning, real world experiences.
- Learning is a collaborative and dynamic process.
- Reflection and applying learning to new situations.
- Increased student responsibility for the learning process.
- Learning is facilitated, rather than taught.

Early formative assessment and feedback

- Formative assessment and feedback provide opportunities for interaction between students and staff, (and/or with each other).
- Structured approaches to providing students with the information and skills to understand the learning process and to succeed.
- Provides staff with understanding of students.
- Feed-forward helps students to understand what is expected of them in assessment.
- Feedback (and feed-forward) can be given by lecturers, peers or students themselves.

Assessment strategies

Traditional: objectivity, clarity, transparency and consistent marking. This 'scientific' approach is called into question by research.

Engage students in the process of assessment.

Inclusive: allows all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know through alternative means.

'There is no reason why alternative forms of assessment could not be devised which are genuinely equivalent in terms of the knowledge and skills assessed, there should correspondingly be no barrier to any student – disabled or not – choosing to be assessed by such a method (Sharpe and Earle, 2000 p. 198)

Proactive personal tutoring

Curriculum model

- Support is integrated into the curriculum. It has 6 objectives:
- Introduce students to the institution
- Show them what is expected of them
- Help them understand their own learning
- Develop institutional and discipline expectations and engagement
- Encourage mutual peer support
- Seek professional help when required

Common outcomes to improve student retention and success

To build enduring and meaningful relationships with staff and peers.

To better understand students as individuals.

To build students' capacity (knowledge, skill or resilience).

To ensure staff/student expectations are matched and realistic.

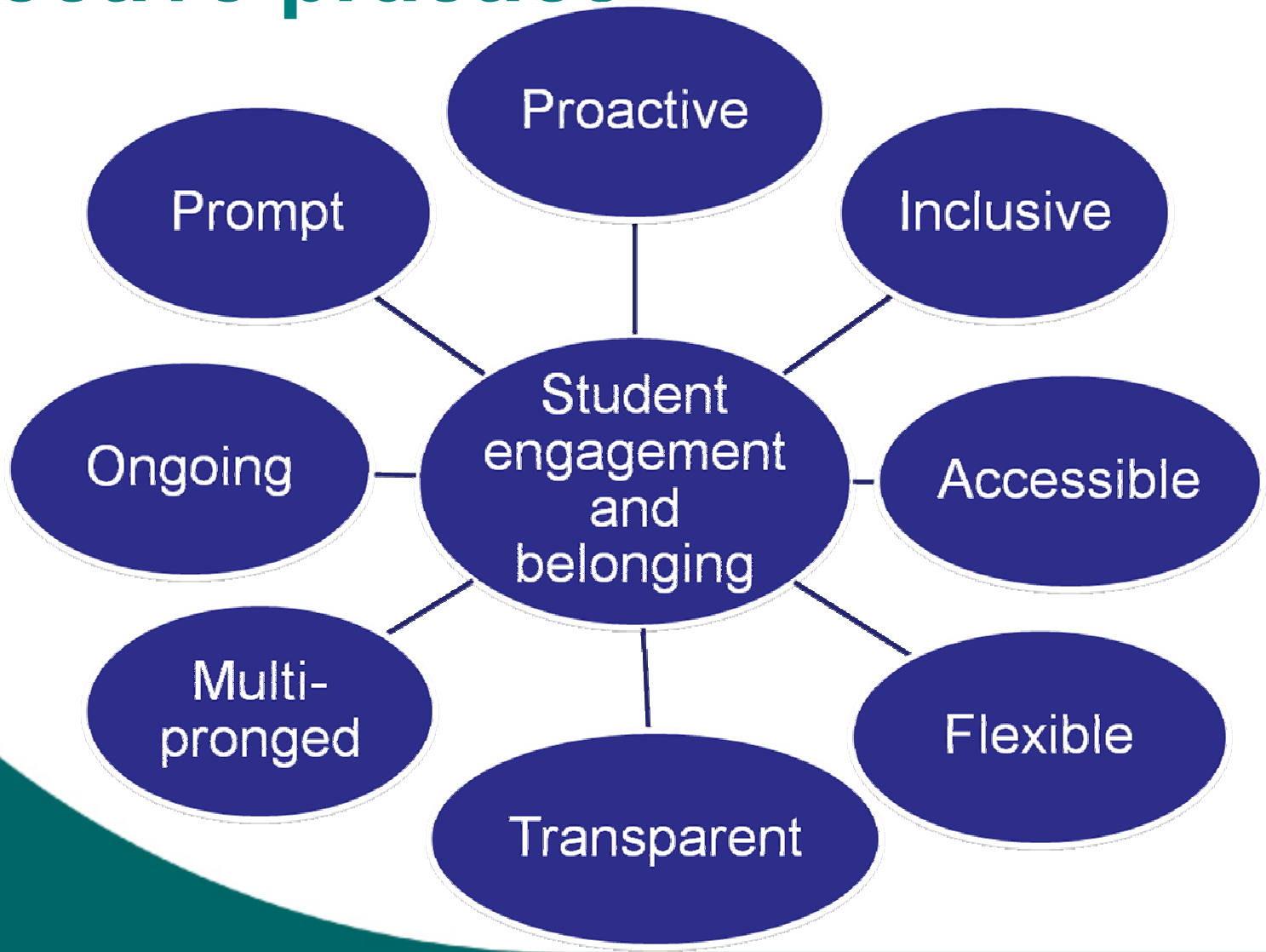
To promote a shared responsibility amongst staff and peers.

To engender a sense of belonging.

To provide a range of services to students.

To maintain communication and promote dialogue with students.

Emerging core principles of effective practice



Conclusions

- Engage students across the lifecycle
- Work across different institutional systems
- Ensure everyday practices and retention interventions are informed by core principles
- Recognise the importance of peer /staff relationships
- Co-ordinate the student learning experience
- Promote a shared responsibility for retention
- Be proactive to engage all students.

Paul Hamlyn Foundation

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND hefce

For further information, please contact:

Professor Liz Thomas
lthomas@phf.org.uk

Action on Access

The Higher Education Academy