



Using pre-entry interventions to improve retention and success in higher education

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Overview



Role of pre-entry interventions to improve retention and success in HE:

- Information, knowledge and skills to improve pre-entry decision making and retention.
- Developing expectations and academic preparation pre-entry to enhance transition, retention and success.
- Fostering early engagement to promote integration and social capital.



Pre-entry decision making

National research in UK and Australia links poor pre-entry information to early withdrawal.

Students have insufficient information about:

- HE in general
- Institutions
- Disciplines
- Specific courses

Deciding to go to HE: AH Greater Merseyside young people



'Young people felt that they were not always given the appropriate information at the right time; there was confusion surrounding requirements to pursue different options or post-16 pathways and some young people and key influencers expressed the need for further information about vocational routes' (Doherty *et al.*, 2007).

Discovering HE is not for you

Students who left HE:

"I suppose it gave me the chance to see what I really wanted to do, and what I didn't want to do" (female).

"I feel a bit surer now of where I want to go with my life in general. I'm still not 100% there but I am a bit more confident of where I am going in terms of a career" (female)

Doubts about subject and course choices



Once in HE concerns about the course are a common reason why students think about leaving.

HERE project: 73-81% of students expressed doubts related to their academic studies.

Anglia Ruskin: approximately 35% of students doubts stem from academic and course-related issues

Institutional choice and match

Poor institutional choice contributes to early withdrawal (Yorke 2000, Jones 2008b). Poor institutional match relates to:

- Institutional belonging
- Institutional belief and loyalty that the programme of study will fulfil future aspirations.

Institutional choice and belonging



'I think one of the biggest apprehensions about coming to university is 'am I going to fit in'? Everything like the way you dress...'

(A young student, who moved away to University)

'Students who felt more socially integrated with the university had a more positive experience of HE, and were less likely to think about leaving'.
(Anglia Ruskin).

Institutional choice and belief



"The degree was the most important thing – I felt that it was time to get serious and think about the future. Besides I've never quit at anything I've started (win or lose)."

Subject and course choice

Subject knowledge, interest and motivation contribute to retention and success; inappropriate choices to withdrawal.

What works? research that enjoying the programme is the most important thing that kept students in HE.

Students choose courses with little knowledge and cursory reading of prospectus. This information is sometimes inaccurate.

Subject and course choice

Most students know very little about the academic department or course they are entering (Booth 1997).

Young researchers on the Wirral found that students selected institutions but were often disappointed by courses.

Sunderland (p49) – Newcastle engineering students who entered clearing did not know much about the course they were entering.

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Subject choice



"I loved English before that, but then when I was doing it at a higher level I really wasn't enjoying it and I thought I would and the course was a lot different from what they explained to me and I just wasn't enjoying it overall."

Subject choice

A 38% first year failure rate for students recruited without traditional science A levels, with the indication that one-third of students failing one or more modules in their first year left the university as academic failures, is a great cause for concern.

Course choice

"I think do as much research as you can ... Try to get as much information as you can about your actual course. Try to visit the uni ... Try to find out information from them to determine whether it's the right course and university for you ... because if you feel like you're not going to do as well as you could do, or you feel like it's not the right place or the right time to go to university, then you're not going to do as well as you could do ... if your heart's not in it you'll probably find yourself struggling or dropping out."
(BU student interview comment)

Information issues

Lack of formal sources of information and support to access information.

Baxter et al 2007 found that support comes from individual teachers rather than systematically from the school.

Young researchers suggest lesson time should be devoted to searching for HE and progression information

Information issues

'... compared with their peers whose parents have higher education experience, these first-generation entrants were less well informed about higher education'

Hatt et al 2007, p302

Role for pre-entry interventions

- Provide good quality information about HE opportunities, institutions, subjects, courses and future pathways.
- Develop students' skills to seek out information to inform HE choices.
- Provide students with opportunities to experience different institutions, subjects and departments.
- Enable students to match future aspirations with institution and course offer.

Expectations and academic preparation



- Academic and social transition into HE is challenging. Students who fail to adjust and integrate are more likely to withdraw (Harvey and Drew 2006).
- There is a gap between expectations and experiences in HE, especially for students from lower socio-economic groups (Forsyth and Furlong 2003).
- Students with more complex expectations adjust better (Pancer et al 2000).

Academic culture shock

- Students tend to assume that HE will be the same as school/college.
- Under-prepared to be autonomous learners with responsibility for organising and structuring study.
- Challenges also relate to lecture format, size of classes and impersonal nature of HE study.
- Do not know what is expected in assessments and have less support and feedback.

Role for pre-entry interventions

- Expose students to HE life and learning.
- Develop understanding about different approach to learning in HE and individual responsibility.
- Develop students basic academic skills for HE.
- Train students in assessment and feedback issues.
- Encourage students to ask for help from peers, academics and others.

Role for pre-entry interventions

- Evidence from Scotland shows that pre-entry programmes can develop academic skills, and have a positive impact on preparedness, retention and achievement.
- Top-up programme GOALS / University of Glasgow (Walker et al 2004).
- Access Summer School, University of Dundee (Blicharski, 1999).

Early engagement

Engagement with the HEI, staff, current students and peers.

Engagement:

- Provides information and understanding directly.
- Generates commitment to the HE experience.
- Offers access to social capital – knowing who to ask.
- Fosters peer networks which sustain students throughout HE.

Role for pre-entry interventions

- Help students to meet each other and form social bonds before they arrive at HE.
- Help students to get to know key members of staff prior to entry so they know where to seek help from.
- Help students to learn from existing students.
- Help student to feel engaged with the institution.

Examples of effective interventions

Most effective interventions combine these roles:

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

Stepping Stones to HE (Bournemouth)

Facebook (Leicester, Portsmouth)

Welcome lunch (Hull)

More information

Thomas, L. Do pre-entry interventions such as Aimhigher impact on student retention and success? A review of the literature. *Higher Education Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 3. July 2011, pp230-250

Student retention and success resources:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/retention-and-success>

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Thank you.

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