



# What works? Learning to improve retention and success

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Retention, Progression and Success in Higher Education, Neil Stewart Associates, 7 February 2013, London

# Overview



- Retention and non-completion in England.
- What works? Student retention and success programme.
- What works? model: Improving student engagement, belonging, retention and success.
- Examples that improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success.

# Non-continuation, completion and thinking about leaving



- The average non-continuation rate was 8.4% for entrants to English higher education institutions in 2009-10;
- Non-continuation rates varied between English institutions between 1.2% and 21.4% in 2009-10;
- The average completion rate for students entering institutions in England in 2009-10 was projected to be 78.4%; and
- Completion rates were projected to vary between institutions between 53.8% and 97.2% in 2009-10.
- **Between 33% (1/3) and 42% (2/5) of students think about withdrawing from HE.**

# What works? Student retention and success programme



- NAO (2007) and PAC (2008): Lack of progress and lack of evidence about what works.
- £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.

# Key messages



- The key message from these 7 projects is the centrality of students having a strong **sense of belonging** in HE; this is most effectively nurtured in the **academic sphere**.
- This puts high quality **student-centred learning and teaching** at the heart of effective student retention and success.

# Key messages



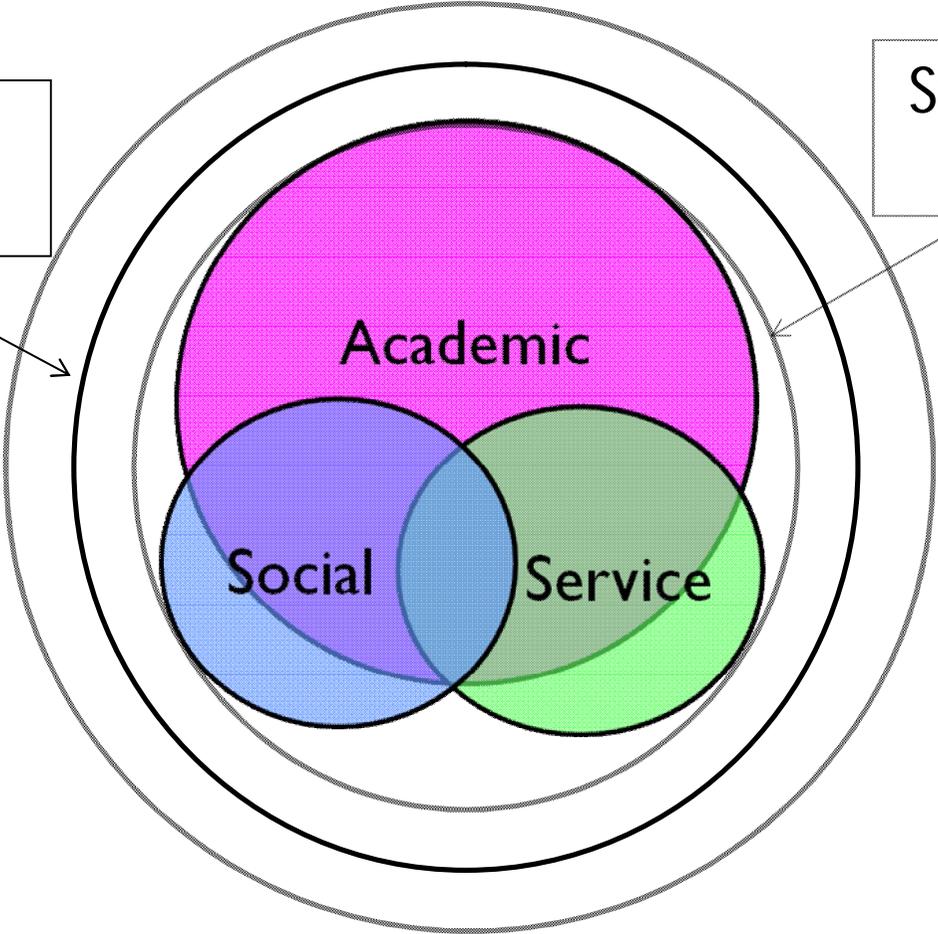
## **Student belonging is an outcome of:**

- 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

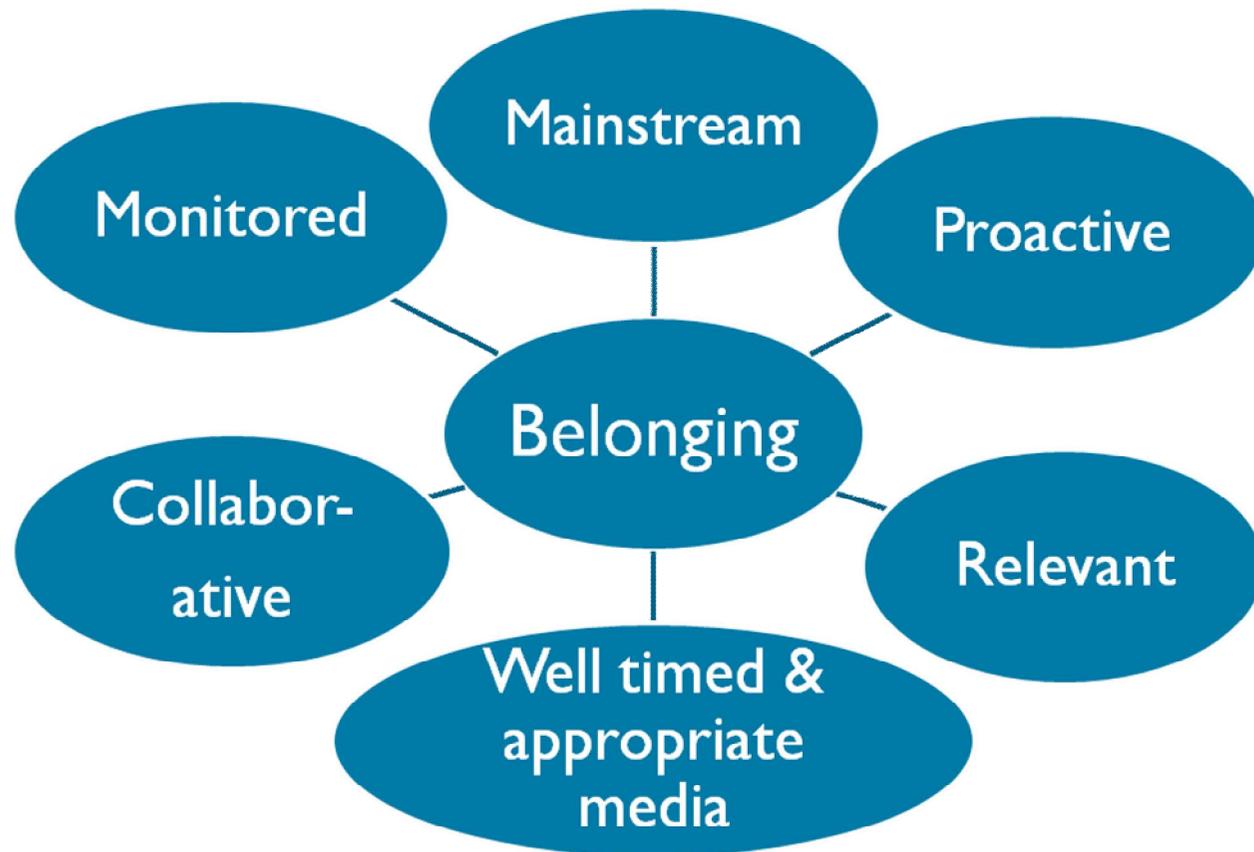
Staff capacity  
building

Student capacity  
building

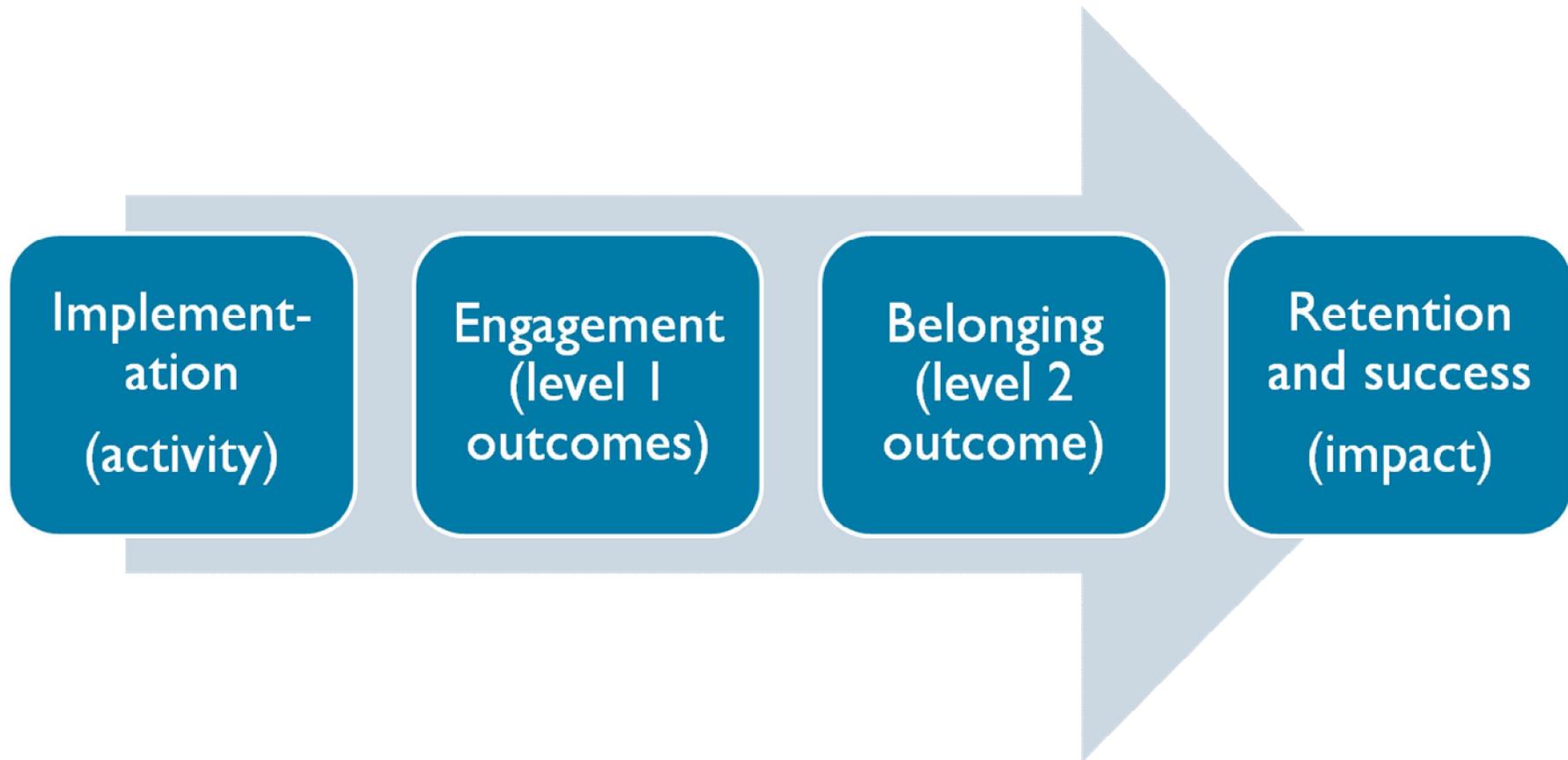


Early engagement extends into HE and beyond

# Implementation: Characteristics of effective interventions and approaches



# What works process



# Reasons for thinking about leaving



The most frequently cited reason for thinking about leaving is course related factors: between 21% and 42% of students (based on 472 reasons from 339 students). (Project 5).

Although higher entry qualifications are correlated with high rates of retention and success there are variations between programmes which demonstrate that academic teams can influence the retention and progression rates (Project 5).

Some specific interventions have been shown to improve retention rates by up to ten percentage points (Projects 2, 5, 6 & 7).

The academic department or programme to which a student belongs has a huge influence on the attitudes and expectations of its students and, crucially, on their overall sense of belonging (Project 3).

# Student-centred learning & teaching



- a) **Staff/student relationships:** knowing staff and being able to ask for help.
- b) **Curricular contents** and related opportunities: providing real world learning opportunities which are interesting and relevant to future aspirations motivate students to engage and be successful in higher education.
- c) **Learning and teaching:** group based learning and teaching that allows students to interact with each other, share their own experiences and learn by doing. A variety of learning experiences, including work placements, and delivered by enthusiastic lectures were found to be important too.
- d) **Assessment and feedback:** clear guidelines about assessment processes and transparency about criteria and feedback to assist students to perform better in the future.

# Student-centred learning & teaching



- a) **Personal tutoring:** as a means of developing a close relationship with a member of staff who oversees individual progress and takes action if necessary, including directing students to appropriate academic development and pastoral support services.
- b) **Peer relations and cohort identity:** having friends to discuss academic and non-academic issues with, both during teaching time and outside of it, and a strong sense of cohort identity.
- c) **A sense of belonging to particular a place** within the university, most usually a departmental building or a small campus, or a hall of residence.

# Field trips, 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. Find out by doing.
Collaborative	Involves programme staff and students work in groups.
Monitored*	Are non-participants followed up?

# Field trips, 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 from focus groups



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 met people during the day yeah. We did a little run around the city, getting into different things. I thought it was a bit tedious, but now when I actually look back it was just getting people to familiarise themselves with the city which was quite clever."

"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, Psychology



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, Psychology



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."

# PASS: Personal and Academic Support System, life sciences



Implementation	Group tutorials developing academic skills and working relationships with staff and students.
Mainstream	Part of the compulsory skills module.
Proactive	All students participate; those who are failing are followed up one-to-one.
Relevant	Assessed coursework set through PASS contributes 30% of the module assessment.
Well-timed & appropriate media	Meet 4-5 times per semester; more frequent meeting in first semester. Face-to-face and text book.
Collaborative	Emphasis on learning with each other and from each other.
Monitored	Attendance monitored and followed-up.

# PASS: Personal and Academic Support System, life sciences



Outcomes	Student survey, interviews, focus groups; attendance monitoring; and data.
Peer relations	Students learn from each other and feel more confident.
Interaction with staff	89% reported sufficient contact with staff through PASS; 88% confident now to ask for academic help.
Developing capacity	Develop skills of all students; including failing students.
Relevant to current/future goals.	Taught by academics from their discipline, so perceived as relevant
Sense of belonging	Shows that the dept cares/they belong.
Retention & success	83% in 2004-05 to 92% in 2007-08.

# PASS: Personal and Academic Support System, life sciences



[We] learn how others are feeling about the course and how they are getting on. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly and that helps everyone have a voice, which is important for those who wouldn't speak up in a lecture.

Made me feel... that there were people to talk to if needed.

I feel it is a great system to get to know your academic advisor and this makes me feel more involved in the Life Science department.

# Conclusions

High quality, student-centred learning and teaching is at the heart of improving the retention and success of all students. Academic programmes that have higher rates of retention and success make use of innovative learning and teaching, in particular:

- academically relevant induction;
- opportunities to get to know staff;
- co-curricular activities;
- group-based learning and teaching;
- varied learning opportunities including real-world and problem-based learning and work placements;
- guidance and support with assessment;
- useful feedback;
- a dedicated physical space; and
- monitoring engagement and taking follow-up action.

# Implementing change and supporting institutions



- 3+ years Student retention and success change programme 2012-15.
- 16 diverse institutions, located across the UK.
- 48 discipline teams distributed across subjects.
- Impact evaluation, including survey of engagement and belonging and analysis of institutional data.
- Contextual evaluation examining strategic factors and the process of change.

# Thank you!



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Student retention and success change programme:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/change/SRS\\_12-13/SRS\\_info](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/change/SRS_12-13/SRS_info)

What works? reports:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/what-works-retention>

Other HEA resources:

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