AN ENGAGING PARTNERSHIP TO IMPROVE STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Improving the retention and success of students in higher education (HE) is an internationally recognised challenge. This paper draws on international literature, and an on-going programme in England to argue that institutions need to focus on enhancing students' engagement in HE to improve retention and success. The emerging model indicates that institutions should develop and promote opportunities for engagement to all students, throughout the student lifecycle, across the institution's academic, social and professional service domains. However, the embedding of opportunities for engagement with peers and professional services into the academic sphere is important for students with limited opportunities for other forms of engagement. Institutions also need to work with students and staff to develop their capacity to engage with each other. It is important that opportunities that HEIs offer to facilitate student engagement are informed by key principles and aim to achieve common outcomes, rather than the choice of specific activity.

Introduction

This short paper is based on the premise that as part of the 'access agenda' higher education institutions (HEIs) should be concerned not just with enabling students from under-represented and equality groups to gain entry to higher education (HE) but also to enable students to be successful, because in the words of Vincent Tinto (2008), access without support is not opportunity (see also Bamber and Tett 2001, p.15). Indeed, this understanding is embedded in the definition of access in the Irish context:

"The concept of 'access' is understood to encompass not only entry to higher education, but also retention and successful completion". (National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013, p14).

This position therefore begs the question of how institutions can improve the retention and success of students in HE – which is of course a matter of international concern (van Stolk et al 2007). Drawing on literature from the UK, US and Australia, and a three-year programme of work which is currently in progress in England, this paper argues that HEIs should proactively promote student engagement as a means to improve student retention and success in HE.

What works? Student Retention and Success Programme

This three-year programme, which is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), aims to generate robust evidence about the most effective strategies to ensure high continuation and completion rates within higher education. Primary data collection is through seven funded projects involving 22 HEIs in England and beyond. The support and co-ordination team – which I am the director of – has worked with project teams to influence and guide the process of data collection and analysis, and is responsible for the programme-level meta-analysis of project findings. This is being done through the development and refinement of a conceptual model of student retention. The initial model (Thomas et al 2009) was informed by literature from the UK. This has been revised and updated in response to feedback from practitioners, researchers and experts across the HE sector, and by drawing on US literature and emerging empirical data (Thomas and May forthcoming). Further details of the programme are available from: www.actiononaccess.org/retention

Developing a Model: Student Engagement to Improve Student Retention and Success

The following discussion draws on literature and emerging empirical data to propose a model for enhancing student retention and success, which puts student engagement at the heart of the process. Engagement opportunities enable students to construct or form an appropriate identity to be successful in HE. This is particularly important in the context of student diversity: there are increasing numbers of students studying locally and remaining in the family home, studying part-time and/or in the workplace and/or who have increased reliance on part-time employment. These students spend less time on campus and have multiple roles or identifies (e.g. parent, carer, employee, employer, student etc), which either co-exist or compete. The institution can provide engagement opportunities and capacity building to help students to construct or form an appropriate, complementary student identity to be part of the higher education community and ultimately be successful in HE and beyond.

1. ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE INSTITUTION AND ACROSS THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE

In the UK there is a growing body of evidence relating to student retention and success. Research exploring the reasons for student withdrawal tends to conclude that there is rarely a single reason why students leave. In most cases, the picture is complex and students leave as a result of a combination of inter-related factors which may include: poor preparation for higher education; weak institutional and/or course match, resulting in poor fit / lack of commitment; unsatisfactory academic experience; lack of social integration; financial issues; and personal circumstances (Jones 2008). Thus, the UK literature suggests that the following types of intervention support student retention and success: pre-entry information, preparation and admission; induction and transition support; curriculum development; social engagement; student support, including financial support; and use of data and monitoring. At a strategic level Yorke and Longden (2008) suggest that an institutional commitment to student learning, and hence to student engagement; proactive management of student transition; curriculum issues such as treating learning as an academic and social milieu; and choosing curricular structures that increase the chances of student success contribute to good student retention.

Research about student persistence has a long and distinguished history in the US (see Troxel 2010). In summary, earlier US research suggested student retention was affected by: '(a) student background variables, (b) interaction by students within the institution, (c) the influence of environmental variables (finances, family support), (d) the presence of attitudinal variables (a subjective evaluation of the perceived quality in self-satisfaction with the institution), and (e) student intention, such as transfer and degree attainment' (Metz, 2002, p. 8).

More recently in the US George Kuh and colleagues have focused on the concept of student engagement in relation to student persistence and success (see Kuh et al 2005). Kuh (2009, p683) has defined student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009)" (emphasis in the original). Indeed, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the US and the Australian Survey of Student Engagement examine students' participation in educationally purposeful activities. Krause (2011 forthcoming) extends the notion of academic engagement by arguing that "learning occurs in a range of settings, both within and beyond the formal curriculum. It involves developing connections within the university as well as building on prior learning, along with learning that takes place in the workplace and community settings". It is thus widely accepted that engagement in the academic sphere is central to effective learning, which contributes to persistence and academic success.

The emerging evidence from the What works? programme is pointing to the importance of collaborative, student-centred learning and teaching strategies (see Crosling et al 2008). These facilitate staff and student interaction, which enables students to develop academically and staff to develop a better understanding of their students. These learning approaches also promote peer interaction and the development of long lasting friendships.

Engagement however can take place beyond the academic domain, in other spheres of the institution, and can have a positive impact on students' retention and success too. Vincent Tinto's influential work points to the importance not just of academic interaction, but also of social engagement, (Tinto 1993) and this is supported by my own institutional research in the UK (Thomas 2002, see also Wilcox et al 2005), where students commented:

I've got a lot of really good friends here. I think that's one of the major things for most people that'll keep them here…That's what kept me here". (p345)

There's a real community because you can sit there and in your group of friends there'll be somebody who knows that group of friends and somebody who knows that group of friends . . You rely on your friends more than anything at university to get you through the hard times, to help you out and to be there to have fun with". (p347).

The emerging empirical evidence reinforces the vital role of friendship to many students, especially when they face difficulties. But it is also clear that the academic sphere can play a central role in facilitating students to develop these friendships, especially for those who spend less time on campus because they live at home and/or have work and family commitments. In addition technology has been successfully used to facilitate social networking between students, especially those who are not based on campus - both pre- and post-entry.

UK universities provide a range of 'professional services' which are designed to attract and recruit students to the institution, provide pastoral support, and develop academic, personal and professional capacities,

and these services are also sites where students can interact with each other and institutional staff and develop and nurture their student and graduate identities. The programme evidence suggests that professional services make an important contribution to the development of students' knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners, both pre- and post entry. This includes for example enabling students to make informed choices about institutions, subjects and courses, and to have realistic expectations of HE study. Many professional services however, are most effective when they are delivered via the academic sphere, rather than relying on students accessing these students autonomously, due to constraints of time on campus. This is exemplified in relation to employability: increasingly institutions are embedding activities designed to increase graduate employability into the core curriculum in partnership with careers professionals, rather delivering services separately through a central careers centre (see Thomas et al 2010). In the pre-entry arena, we know that aspiration raising and the provision of information, advice and guidance about HE is most effective when it is aligned to students' school/college learning (Action on Access 2008).

DIAGRAM 1: INSTITUTIONAL SPHERES OF ENGAGEMENT

The need to engage students in the academic, social and professional services spheres is shown in Diagram 1. Academic engagement is related to 'effective learning', and may be synonymous with, or necessary for 'deep' (as opposed to surface) learning (Ramsden 2003, p97). Social engagement can be seen to create a sense of belonging and offer informal support. Engagement with professional services can develop students' capacities to access and succeed in HE and beyond. However, the academic sphere is a key site for enabling and promoting engagement not just in academic matters, but also with peers and professional services. Furthermore, as has been indicated in the discussion above, engagement should take place throughout the student lifecycle. It begins early with institutional outreach interventions and extends

throughout the process of preparing for and entering HE, time spent in HE and includes progression beyond HE into employment or further learning. This is summarised in Diagram 2 below.

DIAGRAM 2: THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE
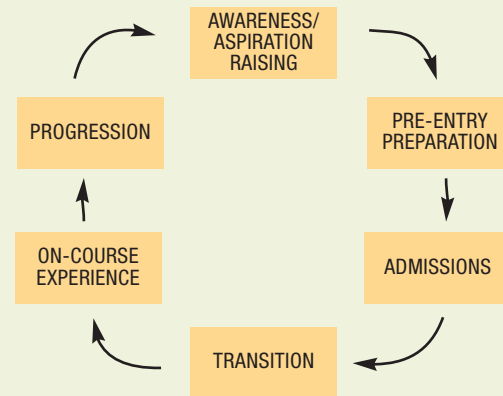
2. A PARTNERSHIP: DEVELOPING STUDENTS' AND STAFF CAPACITY TO ENGAGE

Through the empirical work it is apparent that institutions should work with students to develop their capacity to engage effectively in their HE experience. This includes developing students' knowledge and understanding about the benefits of engaging across the different institutional spheres, and expanding their skills to do so. Project research with part-time, mature and local students has identified a highly instrumental approach to HE, which corresponds with a devaluing of social aspects of an HE experience, reflected in comments about 'not needing more friends'. Various other studies suggest that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds are less likely to engage with student services (Dodgson and Bolam 2002) and with careers services (Hills 2003). While individuals will need different levels of engagement in the different spheres to achieve success in their own terms, "for the majority…the most important support seemed to derive from a special sense of community…from reciprocal acts of recognition and confirmation" (Perry, 1999, 238). This implies that students need to be educated about the value of widespread engagement in their HE experience, and encouraged and facilitated to engage in appropriate opportunities, and given the necessary skills. This may for example include the provision of capacity building modules in the core academic curriculum, or via the induction process.

Institutions must also be aware of the heterogeneity of the student body, and thus the need to engage in different ways. This requires institutions to provide a

range of opportunities for engagement across the institution. This includes recognising that there are differing degrees of engagement which students feel comfortable with, different levels within the institution where students may prefer to engage (e.g. module, course, department, faculty, institution) and a range of sites of engagement, as discussed above. A uniform approach to encouraging engagement may create pressure for conformation, and result in alienation and disengagement (Mann 2005).

Developing engagement opportunities throughout the institution and across the student lifecycle requires all staff to be involved – it is not a task which can be left to a few committed individuals. The notion of engagement should be embedded into the institutional vision and reflected in key policy documents, and this must be actively endorsed by senior managers. Thus, the institution must consider how policies and procedures can ensure staff responsibility, accountability, development, and recognition and reward are in place in relation to engagement to enable all staff to fulfil their obligations. This may include reviewing staff recruitment (e.g. to ensure that responsibility for providing opportunities for engagement are embedded into job descriptions and selection processes); updating induction and training for new staff and continuing professional development; the provision of resources, guidance and other support; ensuring that institutional procedures require staff to engage with students (e.g. through validation processes) and that staff performance and impact are monitored and reviewed (e.g. through the annual review process); and providing mechanisms to recognise and reward staff who excel at engaging students and offer them appropriate progression opportunities. In the empirical research, some staff report that colleagues undertaking research and publication receive much greater recognition and reward within the institution that those who make efforts to improve the student experience.

3. MANAGING ENGAGEMENT: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

At the senior level the institution must take responsibility for managing and promoting student engagement to enhance retention and success. This includes building engagement into the corporate mission, vision and plan and aligning institutional policies towards this priority; providing leadership which explicitly values student engagement throughout the whole institution and across the student lifecycle and promotes whole staff responsibility for engagement; and the development of a

co-ordinated, evidence-informed strategy with explicit indicators and measures of success. In summary, managing engagement involves:

- Provision of a range of opportunities for engagement of different types, at different levels, across the institution in different sites, throughout the student lifecycle.

- Developing students to recognise the importance of engagement and to have the capacity to engage in a range of opportunities.

- Developing staff responsibility for and capacity to provide effective engagement opportunities.

  – Taking responsibility for engagement, including monitoring engagement and acting when there are indicators of lower levels of engagement.

  – Creating a partnership between students and institutions towards a shared outcome of successful learners and graduates.

DIAGRAM 3: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT TO IMPROVE STUDENT RETENTION AND SUCCESS
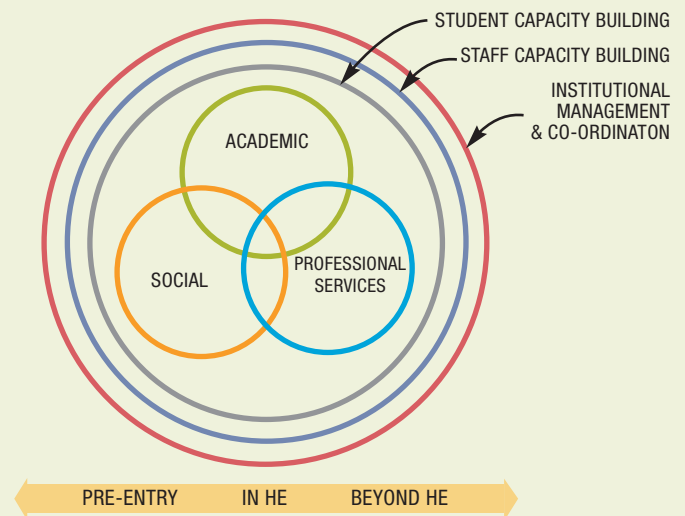
The emerging model of student engagement to improve student retention and success is shown in Diagram 3. It is however still in development, and a further iteration will be published in 2011 (Thomas and May forthcoming).

Implications for Institutions

What the discussion above suggests is that HEIs should proactively provide a range of opportunities for students to engage with peers, academic staff, professional staff and broader constituencies (such as communities and employers), throughout their student journey. The empirical evidence suggests that engagement in the academic sphere is particularly important, but that this

should not be at the expense of developing supportive friendship networks and helping students to access information, skills, opportunities and support to achieve their goals (whether this is with regard to entry into HE, success in HE or progression into employment or further learning). The 'overlaps' between academic and social, and academic and professional services, are vital as this is where non-academic engagement is embedded into the academic sphere, and made accessible to a more diverse student cohort.

The research teams have been investigating the effectiveness of a range of interventions which institutions can implement to provide engagement opportunities across the institution. Examples include: peer mentoring, personal tutoring, study advisers, student services, field trips, welcome lunch and information, extended induction, social networking, project-based learning, early feedback etc. The empirical research is starting to suggest that the exact type of engagement opportunity is less important than the way it is offered and its intended outcomes. Thus, we suggest that in all spheres engagement activities should be planned and informed by the following principles:

1 Proactive: activities should proactively seek to engage students, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur, or the more motivated students to take up opportunities.

2 Inclusive: activities should be aimed at engaging all students, this may mean thinking about the circumstances that constrain some individuals to engage in some activities throughout the institution.

3 Flexible: activities need to be delivered sufficiently flexibly to facilitate the participation of all students, this will include consideration of timing and time commitment, as well as location and accessibility.

4 Transparent: the ways in which students are expected or able to engage in an activity should be transparent, and the potential benefits of engaging should be explicit.

5 Ongoing: activities tend to benefit from taking place over time, rather than one-off opportunities, as engagement takes time (e.g. to develop skills and build relationships).

6 Timely: activities should be available at appropriate times, for example students' needs for engagement in the social and service activities will change over time.

7 Relevant: activities need to be relevant to students interests and aspirations.

8 Integrated: as least some opportunities for engagement in all spheres should be integrated into core activities that students are required to do, i.e. in the academic sphere.

9 Collaborative: activities should encouraged collaboration and engagement with fellow students and members of staff.

10 Monitored: the extent and qualify of student's engagement should be monitored, and where there is evidence of low levels of engagement follow-up action should be taken.

We have observed that the specific activities that are being evaluated have some frequently occurring outcomes. Thus, we suggest that the exact nature of an intervention is less important than the fact that it is aiming to achieve some or all of the following outcomes. Institutions should select activities or interventions which are likely to achieve the highest number of these outcomes, and/or for which they have particularly strong evidence that these outcomes will be achieved.

- Nurture supportive **peer relations**.

- Foster meaningful **interaction between staff and students**.

- Develop **students' knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners.

- Engender a **sense of entitlement and belonging** in HE.

To achieve these outcomes institutions need to encourage and facilitate partnerships between staff and students, which are based on a shared understanding of and responsibility for engagement and success. This will involve winning hearts and minds and creating an appropriate institutional infrastructure.

BIOGRAPHY

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