
Student Retention Conference

Contributed by Dr Ian Taylor, University of Ulster Email: ir.taylor@ulst.ac.uk

Student Retention concerns the serious problem of students who have been judged to have the potential to benefit from higher education and have been preparing for and anticipating the challenges of university but, often within a few weeks, are disillusioned and drop out. This conference arose out of ongoing concerns on this issue within the University of Ulster. However, it was aimed at a wider audience, with over a third of the large attendance coming from other Higher and Further Education institutions. An important component within the conference was the university's FDTL4 STAR project on "Student Transition and Retention" but with six guest speakers and four parallel workshops we gained many insights into the causes of students leaving early and strategies for retaining them. While poor retention rates may be a single issue, it was clear that its causes are multi-faceted, with no single panacea for addressing the issue.

Dr Tony Cook (STAR project) indicated various factors that seemed to be implicated in student retention – was the course part of a student's long term goal? Did he or she see the module material as relevant to the course and overall goal? Was the material delivered in an enthusiastic manner with a variety of delivery and assessment methods? Did the curriculum allow for the more varied backgrounds and qualifications of incoming students? Was the student socially integrated into the university culture, feeling part of a course group and able to interact with both other students and staff?

Veronique Johnston identified five generic strategies that had worked in Napier University. "Sorting" ensured that students were matched with the right course, students at risk were identified and any required skills were provided. "Supporting" was about the whole context of support, not just academically – it included financial advice, stress management, childcare and disability access, recognising that our students are a much less homogeneous group than they were a few years ago. "Connecting" aims to integrate students into the university culture – meeting year 2 students and having tailored induction events. While "transforming students" is an obvious HE strategy, equally important for retention was "transforming the institution". The current HE emphasis on widening access has to be matched by a culture that encourages staff developments in teaching and assessment.

Dr Claire Carter gave a detailed analysis of retention statistics and initiatives within the University of Ulster. Dr Ben Goldblum outlined the very substantial efforts made in Biological Sciences, Manchester to ensure, primarily through interviews, that all applicants were aware of the nature of the university. We should be

more honest in selling our courses through our Web and prospectus material. He recommended that suitably experienced students are used in Open Days and in the Induction process. Dr Helen Richardson (Manchester) outlined the present position of Personal Development Planning (PDP) within universities while Prof Mantz Yorke (Liverpool John Moores University) examined the kind of assessment we should undertake to reinforce student confidence and deeper learning. Workshops gave further material on the STAR project, on PDP, the use of technologies such as WebCT and the SPAT project on student progression and transfer from FE to HE.

As course director of a mathematics degree course, I gained valuable insights into retention issues and now have many ideas on improving the experience of year 1 students. In particular we need to create a course atmosphere where students feel able to discuss problems with staff rather than simply stop coming, and we need to ensure that new subjects like computing are introduced sympathetically. Students need time to adjust to a university learning environment with more responsibility for their own learning, in contrast to a school one where, for example, assessments may be submitted repeatedly. Induction needs to become a process spread over a few weeks rather than a one-off event. Even those who do decide to leave can give us valuable insights that may enable us to improve the university experience for later cohorts of students.

The conference Powerpoint overheads are currently available on the News section of the STAR project website <http://www.ulst.ac.uk/star/> together with other information about the project and future Retention conferences.