
Report on the first meeting of SHERF - the Scottish HE Retention Forum

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This was a large meeting with representatives from just about every Scottish HE institution and a number of interested parties from further afield. The fact that the whole spectrum of the HE sector was actively engaging at this meeting underlines dramatically just how universal the issue of retention has become.

The scene was set by two keynote addresses. Lesley Sutherland (Head of Access Policy & Funding, Scottish Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education) spoke on the SHEFC perspective, and Seamus McDaid (Vice Principal, University of Paisley) followed with an institutional view. Both talks made a plea for a much more liberal interpretation of “withdrawal leading to positive outcomes” and sought to re-define the idea of “failure” (both for the individual and the institution) of withdrawal. Nonetheless there was a clear recognition of the need to develop techniques to enhance retention. These were categorised as “sorting” (monitoring programme match, centralising clearing, permitting early transfers, awareness of ‘At Risk’ groups, use of diagnostic tests), “supporting” (developing skills, providing bridging courses, financial awareness roadshows, Disability Networks – ‘One Stop’ Childcare, Stress Management) and “connecting” (meeting & greeting, student guides, induction, tailored discipline-based events, student mentors, student diaries).

Participants had the choice of attending two out of five workshops before and after lunch, which allowed browsing amongst the various poster sessions.

Workshop - Enhancing Achievement: Implementing Strategy for a managed, informed and open environment led by Hazel Knox and Muir Houston, University of Paisley. Although more of a presentation than a genuine workshop, this was still a fascinating session. Essentially, this was a mid-term (the first phase is scheduled for completion in March 2004) report of analytical work in progress drawing on a longitudinal study of students enrolled (at Paisley) in 2000/01 and 2001/02. Engaging with the national and international debates about widening participation and student non-completion, the project followed a population of 2306 new students

in 2000/01, of whom 225 withdrew. 50 (ex-)students were interviewed by telephone (110 numbers tried) and the results compared with the “official” documentation. Some of the more striking points to emerge include:

- According to HESA returns 78.7% of the 225 were in categories that tells us almost nothing about the reasons for withdrawal
- It seemed from focus groups and interviews that students doing more modules were more engaged with university life and most of the university’s services
- There is a real problem in agreeing upon robust data and reliable measures and this problem will confront any analytical approach to retention
- When complete, the project hopes to identify areas of best practice and to provide recommendations, which will inform both access and retention strategies at an institutional level.

Slides from this workshop may be found at:

http://www-sherf.paisley.ac.uk/images/SHERFmhrr_files/frame.htm

Workshop - Raising Achievement: Implementing strategies for the design of teaching, learning and assessment led by Kathy Fowler, Director of Wider Access Policy and Sara Preston, Academic Learning Support Unit, University of Aberdeen. This workshop followed a well-trying format of having small groups deliver their thoughts on a variety of questions surrounding the impact of various internal and external drivers, which shape the development of strategies and policies relating to the teaching and learning environment. Unfortunately, just as things were getting beyond the trivial, groups were moved on swiftly to the next “topic”. The use of “Blue Peter” style answer sheets (displaying the conclusions we should have reached) added to a sense of dislocation. Lots of points to think about for anyone planning a workshop session.

The meeting closed with a “reporting back” plenary which supplied enough further issues to fully justify making this an annual event.