Beyond what works:
Towards a theoretical framework to understand and improve student retention and success in higher education

Professor Liz Thomas, Faculty of Education
Overview

- Student retention in England.
- Introduction to the What works? Student retention and success programme.
- Key findings and conceptual model.
- Examples of effective interventions.
- Linking the model to other theoretical frameworks.
- Discussion.
Non-continuation rate

- **Continuation rate**: proportion of an institution’s intake which is enrolled in HE in the year following their first entry to HE.
- 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;
- Lancaster 2010-11: young entrants - 4.2%; mature entrants - 16.4%.
Completion rate

- **Completion rate**: proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies until they obtain their qualification, with no more than one consecutive year out of higher education.

- The average completion rate for students entering institutions in England in 2009-10 was projected to be 78.4%.

- Completion rates were projected to vary between institutions between 53.8% and 97.2% in 2009-10.

- Lancaster 2010-11: 91.7%

£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.
Key findings

- Between 1/3 and 2/5 of students think about withdrawing from HE.
- Academic issues, feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in and concern about achieving future aspirations are the primary reason why students think about leaving.
- Early engagement in the academic sphere (pre-entry, induction and first semester) can develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, inform realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop student confidence and nurture a sense of belonging.
Key findings

- Relationships between staff and students and peers promote and enable student engagement and success in HE. These should be nurtured pre-entry, in the classroom and in the delivery of professional services.
- Some programmes have better rates of retention than would be predicted on the basis of entry grades; and some specific interventions have been shown to improve retention rates by around 10 percentage points.
- Particularly effective interventions are situated in the academic sphere and have an overt academic purpose, while also developing peer and staff/student relations.
Early engagement extends into HE and beyond

Institutional management and co-ordination

Staff capacity building

Student capacity building

Academic

Social

Service
Characteristics of effective interventions

- Belonging
- Mainstream
- Proactive
- Relevant
- Well timed & appropriate media
- Monitored
- Collaborative
What works process

- Implementation (activity)
- Engagement (level 1 outcomes)
- Belonging (level 2 outcome)
- Retention and success (impact)

Strategic enablers
## Group induction, engineering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implementation</th>
<th>Fun, semi-structured approach to group formation during induction in engineering</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Activity takes place as part of academic induction for all level 1 students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>All students participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant</td>
<td>It is led by senior lecturer as part of the course. Groups then undertake projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Well-timed &amp; appropriate media</td>
<td>During first week. Emphasis is on forming groups rather than providing information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Promotes peer interaction and group working. Structured to promote mixing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitored*</td>
<td>Qualitative feedback and review of data. Are non-participants followed up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Surveys and focus groups with students and analysis of institutional data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer relations</td>
<td>Groups continued to work and socialise together one year later (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with staff*</td>
<td>Opportunity to get to know a key member of staff.</td>
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<td>Developing capacity</td>
<td>Students help each other (44% reported receiving help)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relevant to current/future goals*</td>
<td>Group working in the curriculum, and relevant to engineering employment.</td>
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<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Created a belonging always or mostly (81%)</td>
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<td>Retention &amp; success</td>
<td>Better retention rates year on year (85%-94%) and compared to other engineering schools.</td>
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“....it kind of makes....you don’t just feel like one individual person on a course, it is kind of like you are in a conglomerate of people kind of thing...I think it does definitely make you feel part of the group or part of something within the year group rather than just one lone person.”

“…I think if you are part of the kind of group then if, if you are going to drop out then.... or if you are struggling academically then you have got people there to support you as well”.

(Engineering students, Newcastle University)
Links to international research

*Transition pedagogy* (e.g. Kift 2009, Kift, Nelson, and Clarke 2010).

- Learning and teaching strategy
- Enabling students to make the necessary changes to adapt to life as a university student
- Involves both curricular and co-curricular activities embedded within university structures.

- Two further projects have developed related to pedagogy for low SES students and learning engagement.
Student Engagement for Retention and Success: A Transition Pedagogy for Widening Participation

Professor Sally Kift
ALTC Senior Fellow; ALTC Discipline Scholar: Law
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

What Works? Student Retention and Success Conference
University of York
28 March 2012
Disconnected from educational research

“There is considerable overlap across these three projects, within their research teams and the ideas mobilised within the projects themselves. A further commonality is their disconnection from the broader field of educational research and from related fields such as cultural studies, philosophy and social theory. Even so, they are the stand out projects in Australian higher education learning and teaching studies”. (Gale and Parker 2013).
Does this matter?

- Inductive applied research about an important policy issue that has had an impact on:
  - National HE policy
  - Institutional policy
  - Individual practice
What is the point of theory and conceptual frameworks?

"I want you to explicitly and expertly use that theory, those concepts and those frameworks, to develop your understanding of the problem. Further...I want you to use the problem... to challenge the theory, concepts and frameworks. I want to see you developing a dialogue between theory and practice, to the benefit of both".

(TU874 course text, pp69-70)
Professor Morris Zapp aspires to be "the highest paid teacher of Humanities in the world".

“Some years ago he had embarked…on an ambitious critical project: a series of commentaries on Jane Austen…. The idea was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle, historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian-allegorical, ethical, exponential, linguistic, phenomenological, archetypal, you name it; so that when each commentary was written there would be simply nothing further to say about the novel in question.”
Theoretical underpinnings

- Academic and social integration (Tinto)
- Student involvement and engagement
- Retention, engagement & belonging
- Habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu)
- Institutional habitus
Tinto's model

Academic integration

Teaching, learning support, facilities, etc.

Goal Commitment

Institutional Commitment

Individual attributes

Prior qualifications

Social integration

Debt, counselling, medical, personal, family events, etc.

Family attributes e.g. mother's education

Dropout decisions
Bourdieu

Habitus

Dispositions and norms

Institutional habitus

Institutional norms

Cultural capital

Assets that mobilise authority

Symbolic violence

Imposition of ‘norms’ on others
Emphasis of alternative theories

Changing students

Changing institutions
Is the What works programme the missing piece?
Or are we missing other conceptual pieces?
# Social capital

## Social capital – networks and norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bonding – homogenous groups (e.g. family, friends, similar student groups).</th>
<th>Bridging – heterogeneous groups (e.g. students from different backgrounds)</th>
<th>Linking – to those with authority (e.g. academics, HE staff and managers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HORIZONTAL</td>
<td>HORIZONTAL</td>
<td>VERTICAL</td>
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</table>
Effective education

- Contact between staff and students
- Reciprocity and co-operation between students
- Respects diversity
- High expectations
- Active learning
- Time on task
- Feedback
Active and collaborative learning

Challenging academic activities

Formative communication with academic staff

Enriching educational experiences

Feel legitimated and supported

Student engagement
Learning and teaching as the glue

- Bonding social capital between students
- Bridging social capital between diverse students
- Linking social capital with HE staff/institution
- Cultural capital to develop understanding and capacities
Conclusions and discussion

- This programme has been successful in generating practical and useful knowledge.
- Can theory be used to improve these practical benefits further?
- Can this inductive study be used to challenge and develop theory further?
- Should we take the Prof Morris Zapp approach?
- Should we integrate theories and encourage others to use and develop the model?
- What would you do next?
What works phase II

Data and evaluation

Institutional action

What works programme

Change programme
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Thank you!