Enhancing the early student experience

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This paper is concerned with identifying how the early student experience can be enhanced in order to improve levels of student retention and achievement. The early student experience is the focus of this project as the literature has consistently declared the first year to be the most critical in shaping persistence decisions. Programme managers of courses with high and low retention rates have been interviewed to identify activities that appear to be associated with good retention rates. The results show that there are similarities in the way programmes with high retention are run, with these features not being prevalent on programmes with low retention. Recommendations of activities that appear likely to enhance the early student experience are provided.

Keywords: *Progression; Retention; Strategies; Widening participation*

Introduction

This paper reports the results of a case study of one UK university. The purpose of the case study was to explore developments to inform practice which will enhance the early student experience and improve retention and achievement. This paper reports the results of enquiries into the operations of programmes with high and low retention rates. It describes specific areas where differences in the operation of programmes with high and low retention rates were noted and provides recommendations of activities that will enhance students' early experience such that retention is optimized. While the research was carried out at one UK university, that particular university, in common with other universities in many countries, has extended its student recruitment both in numbers and to include a wider diversity of students. For this reason, the results of this research should have resonance and be of interest to all educators who are concerned with student retention.

The structure of the paper is as follows. A review of the literature on student retention is provided, followed by a description of the research process. Results of the analysis of the data are detailed, classified into the main themes that emerged. The

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paper concludes with recommendations of activities that could enhance the early student experience.

Context

The paper is concerned with dealing with the effect of a mass higher education system and both government and institutional policy of widening participation. Universities put a great deal of effort into recruitment and widening participation. Widening participation means that a greater variety of students are entering higher education; however, true participation is only achieved when these students attain their desired qualifications. Without a corresponding change in how a university operates, there is a danger that wider participation might result in more students failing. For this reason, it is important that universities respond to the needs of students. This has been recognized for some time in Australia, which has conducted three national surveys of first-year students in the past ten years: in 1994 (McInnis & James, 1995), 1999 (McInnis *et al.*, 2000) and 2004 (Krause *et al.*, 2005), while in the UK the first national student satisfaction survey was conducted only recently (*National Student Satisfaction Survey*, 2005).

It is necessary to recognize that some of the reasons for student withdrawal rest within the university and can therefore be addressed (McInnis, 2003). While Floud (2002) argued that performance indicators show that most of the variation in non-completion rates can be explained, at least in statistical terms, by variation in the characteristics of student recruits, the UK Secretary of State for Education and Employment's funding letter to the HFCE (2000, para. 11, cited in Floud, 2002, p. 57) stated, 'there are unacceptable variations in the rate of "drop out" which appear to be linked more to the culture and workings of the institution than to the background or nature of the students recruited'.

The literature has consistently declared the first year to be the most critical in shaping persistence decisions and plays a formative role in influencing student attitudes and approaches to learning (Tinto, 1987, 1996; Pascarella, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Astin, 1993; Johnson, 1994; McInnis & James, 1995; Allen, 1999; Blythman & Orr, 2003; Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2003). Tinto (1988), Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) and Yorke and Thomas (2003) all agree that prioritizing first-year resource allocation, and offsetting the extra cost of the first-year experience by savings in subsequent years, can reap dividends in improved student success. The notion of 'front-loading' of institutional action is an appropriate strategy to reduce the early incidence of student departure.

The main issue therefore is to identify how it may be possible to maximize student achievement and optimize retention within an environment of widening participation, and with an increasing and more varied student base.

Issues that impact on retention

Within the current environment of mass higher education, which encompasses a diverse student population with growing numbers from recognized 'equity target

groups' (McInnis, 2003, p. 389), it is all too easy to blame this new generation of students for falling retention rates—and indeed many do. However, it is more productive to concentrate and classify those issues that impact on retention that are within the power of the university to alter.

Pre-entry information

Kealy and Rockel (1987) investigated student perceptions of college quality and found that first impressions measured through the campus visit were a very strong influence across all dimensions of college quality. Students with a positive first impression of a university may be extrinsically motivated to persist (Allen, 1999). Yorke and Thomas (2003) found that institutions that performed higher than their HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) benchmarks for completion were involved in outreach work with potential entrants, which served the dual function of beginning the process of engagement with institutions early, and assisting students to possess higher levels of academic preparedness. However, the studies by Brennan (2001) and Watson *et al.* (2004) recognized that the challenge for student recruitment in HE is how to communicate with prospective students who mistakenly believe they already know enough to make an informed choice of course and institution. In the first-year experience study by Krause *et al.* (2005), it was found that while the enhanced efforts to bridge the gap between school and university may account for students' increasingly positive views of the role of school in preparing students for university study, the proportion of students feeling positive in this regard was still only 40%, with around 30% feeling ill-prepared to choose a university course on leaving school.

Induction

Students' decisions to withdraw are significantly affected by the degree of their intellectual and social integration into the life of the institution (Tinto, 1982; Johnson, 1994; Trotter & Cove, 2005). It is possible to lessen considerably the social trauma of moving from the relatively secure social environment of school to that of an unknown and possibly distant university environment (Tinto, 1982). Peat *et al.* (2001) found that a workshop to develop peer networks facilitated the formation of social networks and peer groups, which eased the transition to university, while Zeegers and Martin (2001) argued that a learning-to-learn program can have a positive impact on student learning and on assessment outcomes.

The needs of students who apply and are accepted late must be considered: Bennett (2003) discovered that those students who began their academic career late and missed the first few weeks of semester were more likely to feel lonely and isolated and be generally dissatisfied with the programme.

Personal tutor support

The transformation from an elite towards a mass higher education system has brought with it a much wider diversity of students into our institutions who might

previously have been prevented from participating, and who are more likely to need additional support. Student psychological state is strongly associated with student withdrawal, and an increased focus on helping students deal with personal problems or crises, and supporting them through this period of personal and intellectual growth, should be an integral rather than ancillary feature of HE (Jaques, 1990; Earwaker, 1992; Johnson, 1994).

The majority of students do not seek support (Christie *et al.*, 2004), therefore an institutional strategy to build good support must develop structures that reach all students (Blythman & Orr, 2003). In a study by Gutteridge (2001), every single student interviewed reported some difficulty when entering higher education, and the issue is further complicated by the fact that the time of a young individual's life assigned traditionally to the pursuit of higher education is also a time of intense mood swings and attitudes (Raaheim *et al.*, 1991).

Yorke and Thomas (2003) found that one institution in their study had developed much tighter guidelines for students and staff about the purpose and contents of tutorials, and another had introduced a more proactive variant in which the tutorial was based around an agenda that had to be prepared in advance by the student. Included in Jones's (2002) personal views and suggested plans to improve academic and pastoral support are suggestions involving personal tutors in skills development and also integrating their role into the mainstream curriculum.

Attendance

Students who withdraw have been found to miss classes more often, have poorer study skills and less efficient time-management skills than students who continue with their studies (Johnson, 1994; Fitzgibbon & Prior, 2003). Gracia and Jenkins (2002) found that the attendance rate of those students who passed their course ranged from 67% to 98%, with an average attendance rate of 88%, while attendance of those who failed ranged from 53% to 92%, with an average rate of 69%.

Teaching and learning activities

Instructor behaviour has been associated with differential student persistence (Johnson, 1994), and McInnis (2003) believed that the fundamentals of good undergraduate teaching should be supported. Heywood (2000) argued that the effective delivery of the curriculum depends on multiple-strategy approaches to instruction. The requirement is for methods stressing active learning rather than the traditional didactic lecture (Biggs, 1999). Thomas (2002) concluded that characteristics identified by students as impacting on persistence decisions include collaborative teaching and learning which promotes social relations between students through academic activities.

Mortiboys (2002) argued that a learning and teaching strategy which directly targets the development of student commitment and ability enhances their likelihood of staying the course and must be at the heart of any strategy to improve retention. In

the studies by McInnis (2003) and Yorke and Thomas (2003), there are examples of institutions developing their curriculum provision to meet the needs of a more diverse student body.

Assessment

The literature tends to favour the use of formative assessment as a means of improving learning by encouraging 'reflection-for-action' (Cowan, 1998). Heywood (2000) argued that, since students learn in part to be assessed, their learning should be assessment led in the most positive meaning of the phrase. Yorke (2002) found that some institutions have redesigned the first semester to be a formative experience, deferring summative assessment till the end of the first year and thereby allowing formative assessment to offer students opportunities to build on their experience. Good assessment will probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor (Boud, 1988; Ellington, 1999; George & Cowan, 1999). Yorke (2003) argued that the need to perform for summative assessments at the end of the first semester is a particular pressure on those who are acclimatizing and makes little sense when students merely have to pass the first year to qualify for the honours programme. However, Trotter (2006) discovered that students welcome summative assessment as an incentive and motivator to study.

Other previous research on retention has focused on reasons why students withdraw or what characteristics students who do not complete their programme of study may have. A theory of possible actions that as a result may encourage students to persist has developed. However, these theories have not been tested to provide the empirical evidence that they work. While Martinez (1997) supported the idea that retention rates could be improved by institution-based initiatives, a review of student non-completion models undertaken by Laing and Robinson (2003) indicated that current models offer little in the way of explanations of the causes of non-completion or little justification for the strategies used to reduce non-completion. There is very little in the way of guidance on or hard evidence of which strategies are likely to stimulate the greatest improvements (Johnston, 2001; Christie *et al.*, 2004).

This case study looks at what actually happens within the programmes in one university, and seeks to relate that to its effect on the early student experience, with particular reference to student achievement and retention. It focuses on activities operating within programmes rather than the characteristics and opinions of students. We are not able to change the personal characteristics of our students; however, it is possible to change the activities that operate within our programmes.

Research methodology

The overriding research question is: in what ways might programmes be run to make them more effective at optimizing student achievement and retention? The research focuses on the way that courses are managed. It considers if there are activities

inherent in programmes with high student retention that do not feature as strongly or are not present in those programmes with low student retention. The results of the research, while perhaps not providing hard evidence of causality, instead provide evidence that there is a correlation between activities that are a common feature in certain programmes and good retention rates.

There were three elements to the research: to identify programmes with high and low retention, to explore the key issues that influence retention and to discover if there are activities common to programmes with high retention that are not prevalent on programmes with low retention.

Identifying programmes

There are a number of definitions of 'retention'. For this study, students who have been retained are considered to be those students who enrolled in the first year and progressed to enrol in the second year of their programme of study. Therefore students who remained at the university but transferred to another course have not been retained on the programme. There is also no definition of what is considered to be a 'high' or 'low' retention rate. It can depend on such things as student entry profile, numbers of students on a programme or subject area being studied. For this reason, programmes were selected by triangulating information from internally generated statistics prepared by the university management, annual programme reviews prepared by programme managers, HEFCE (2002) statistics and suggestions from heads of school or other relevant people who were aware of problems or good practice. The reliability of the internal statistics was therefore tested by this triangulation.

Programmes were selected from all schools within the university and 20 programme managers were asked to participate. A total of 16 programme managers responded and interviews were conducted representing 15 programmes (one programme manager had just started and the previous manager was also interviewed) in 14 out of 16 schools. Six of those interviewed represented programmes with high retention rates (HighGroup) and nine represented programmes with low retention rates (LowGroup).

Programmes were selected to ensure that a variety of pre-entry qualifications and student numbers were represented in both groups. Programmes were then categorized into discipline type as recognised in the literature, using the groupings derived by Becher (1989) based on the earlier work of Biglan (1973a, 1973b) and Kolb (1981). Becher classified disciplines under the broad headings of hard pure (e.g. physics), soft pure (e.g. history), hard applied (e.g. engineering) and soft applied (e.g. business studies). The categorization of programmes in the study was done to ensure that particular discipline types were not more prevalent in one group. There was a variety of discipline type within each group, thus reducing to some extent the influence on results of factors which may be regarded as distinctive features of different knowledge domains and their social milieux (Neumann *et al.*, 2002).

Exploring the key issues

The second element of the research involved the identification of key issues that affect student achievement and progression in the first year at university. These issues were identified from a number of sources. A review of literature on student retention and achievement was conducted. Focus groups were held at a university management retreat where groups were asked to consider issues surrounding student retention. A workshop on student retention was attended and copies of the poster displays resulting from the discussions in this workshop were obtained. These various sources allowed identification of issues that may impact on student retention. From this list of possible influences on retention, six broad areas were identified to provide a focus for the research.

Identifying activities

The third stage was to identify activities within each programme that may have influenced retention rates. It was decided to contact programme managers, as in their capacity they should be involved in or be aware of the operation of all areas of their programme. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow access to their accounts and articulations of activities within their programme. An interview guide was prepared around each of the six broad areas previously identified and further issues as pointers were included to ensure that interviewees discussed the topics that were considered important.

The list of possible influences on retention was revisited to ensure that all items were included for discussion in at least one of the interview questions. The interview questions were structured to be open and depth-probing and new questions were developed in interviews to follow unexpected leads that arose in the course of the interview (Glesne, 1998). Two pilot interviews were conducted, with no major changes to the format being required.

Analysis

Data were analysed by personally transcribing interviews and reading and rereading transcripts in order to be familiar with the content, assigning codes to portions of the data, identifying emerging themes and generating results based on these themes.

A table was prepared for each area discussed at interview. As the interviews were transcribed and read, common themes and topics were listed in rows on the table and coded on the transcripts. Every programme was assigned a column in each table, and when programme managers commented on a particular theme, this was noted in the particular column. Transcripts were then reread to ensure that all comments on the emerging themes were noted.

The tables were reviewed and analysed to highlight those areas where most difference was found in the operations of HighGroup and LowGroup. There were areas where no noticeable difference was found between activities on the various

programmes, or where identified themes in some interviews transpired not to feature in many others. As the purpose of this research was to discover in what ways programmes might be run to make them more effective in optimizing student achievement and retention, the results concentrate on those areas where most difference was noted. The results are grouped into themes with supporting evidence provided by a summary analysis of the relevant table and selected quotes from the interviewees in HighGroup (HG) and LowGroup (LG).

Results

Pre-entry information

Overall, the information provided to prospective students in HighGroup was more comprehensive than that in LowGroup and was targeted to reach the appropriate audience. Programme managers in HighGroup were more involved in recruitment and admissions while those in LowGroup did not see it as their responsibility:

> Right, it's not really my area, it should be I know. (LG8)

All of HighGroup recognized the importance of the prospectus entry, e.g.:

> Most of the evidence seems to point to the prospectus. (HG5)

while only two in LowGroup thought it was important:

> I don't think the students take an awful lot from the brochure to be honest. (LG9)

Interestingly, there was evidence from one participant in both groups that the prospectus entry had improved the number of applicants to their course. This confirmed that the prospectus entry is still a main source of information for prospective students.

All the programmes in HighGroup had school and college links compared to just three out of nine in LowGroup. Similarly, four of the HighGroup programmes were involved in enrichment days and just one from LowGroup. Enrichment days are events where students from local schools and colleges are invited to the university and are introduced to the facilities and courses available. All programmes had open days, but HighGroup were more enthusiastic about their importance, ensuring the format fitted the audience and that all students were provided with relevant information.

Four programmes in LowGroup appeared to be promoting their course to the wrong market or were unsure how to promote the course:

> The problem is on the outreach programme, he tends to go to better schools from which we don't really draw our students … it's a good laugh going up to X College, but realistically we don't get students from it, so it doesn't really help. (LG5)

Therefore, the study showed that the programmes in HighGroup worked harder to attract students. They were more likely to be involved in higher education enrichment days, had more links with local schools and colleges and took seriously the provision of an appropriate prospectus entry.

Induction

Both groups provided induction for their students during freshers' week. However, the format and focus of the induction sessions differed. All those in HighGroup actively involved students and provided opportunities for students to get to know one another (e.g. fun tasks and ice-breakers):

> The focus really of induction week is getting them to know each other. (HG2)

None of the LowGroup programmes did this, with induction sessions being more didactic.

The induction for every programme in HighGroup had links to the forthcoming semester and the course, compared to just one in LowGroup. Four programmes in HighGroup used induction week to get to know the students and to identify and attempt to remedy possible problems, while none in LowGroup did this.

Both groups issued a programme handbook that provided information on course requirements and other topics considered useful; however, both groups mentioned they were unsure how much of this students read. Programme HG5 had an interesting way of ensuring at least some of the information was identified while helping students to integrate:

> We produced a little quiz that related to that [student handbook] and with a mate or two they are supposed to fill that in. It's really anything to break that session up, I guess. (HG5)

Programmes in HighGroup provided late applicants with relevant information to inform their decisions, and subsequently ensured they were integrated. Two of LowGroup recognized the problem that late entrants missed out on open days, one of whom intended to have clearing open days for the first time in the following year, in order to remedy this problem.

To summarise, a much greater effort is made in HighGroup to help students settle in, make friends and get to know other students on their programme. Induction in HighGroup was more activity based; it was a more informal process and provided the opportunity for students to meet each other and integrate as a cohort. HighGroup were more likely to use induction week to recognize possible problems and attempt to remedy them. Students accepted through clearing to programmes in HighGroup were more likely to be provided with time and additional information to inform their decision. LowGroup programmes did not take these approaches, although there was evidence that some programmes recognized the problem and had scheduled clearing open days for the following year.

Personal tutor support

The type of personal tutor support provided in the two groups was markedly different. In HighGroup, personal tutorials were linked more strongly with the course and there was an effort to allocate students to tutors who either taught them or had very close links with the course. In all cases in LowGroup, personal tutors were allocated completely at random.

Students were seen more often and more regularly in HighGroup. Those in LowGroup were scheduled meetings only once or twice each semester. In HighGroup meetings were timetabled and linked to modules either related to their course or to study skills support, whereas in LowGroup, meetings were arranged by placing a list on the notice-board or tutor's door and were less likely to have an agenda.

In HighGroup, the personal tutor's role was to provide both academic and personal support and, in three cases, to monitor academic progress and provide counseling when required. In LowGroup, personal and academic support was linked on just one programme. The others lacked a focus for meetings and provided contact as and when required.

Students were more likely to attend personal tutorial meetings in HighGroup. On one programme it was a requirement, on three programmes attendance was considered good:

> It's expected—more than it's expected, it's required—in order to progress through the programme. (HG4)

In LowGroup, seven programme managers reported that either students did not attend meetings or that attendance was poor. Only one was satisfied with their attendance.

Personal tutor policy generally requires that students are seen as early as possible in the semester and at least once each semester. In practice, the professionalism, idealism and commitment of tutors may be undermined by 'work situations and organisation structures' (Hudson, 1993, p. 395). This was reflected in this study:

> [we see students] in about November, so the students will have been here six or seven weeks. Of course, with these numbers and pressures, it may be that some of these students are seen in week 10 or 11. (LG3)

In summary, HighGroup has more effective and successful personal tutor systems. Personal tutorials were more likely to be timetabled, with meetings scheduled regularly and early in the first semester. They were more focused and directed, fulfilling an academic as well as a personal role, and were better attended.

The impact of undertaking paid employment and other commitments

Floud's (2002) survey revealed that 85% of students had jobs during term time and that hours of work varied from five to 22. In recent years, anecdotal evidence points to these figures having increased even further. Programme managers were asked to comment on the impact of student employment on their programme. All agreed that the increased likelihood of students being committed to part-time jobs should be considered when managing the course. The main difference between the groups was the provision of free days by HighGroup:

> I've tried to give all students, in every semester on every level, one clear day and another half, so sometimes they get more than that … it certainly helps student satisfaction in terms

of complaints about the timetable. It seems to be one element of overall satisfaction with
the programme. (HG1)

However, both groups indicated that they would be flexible in allowing students to
change classes if possible to cater for work or childcare commitments.

Attendance

Five programmes in HighGroup reported that attendance was strictly monitored in
all modules, with one indicating that it was 'sort of monitored'. Within this group
there was also an ethos that attendance was required and not just expected and
students were asked to provide an explanation for non-attendance:

We tell them right from the beginning how important it is … I chase them up and
colleagues chase them up as well, yes we are quite rigorous. (HG6)

Just one programme for LowGroup was strictly monitored. For the majority of
programmes in this group, attendance was either poorly monitored or not monitored
at all.

Teaching and learning activities

All programmes had a variety of teaching and learning methods, including lectures,
seminars, tutorials, workshops, group work and presentations. However, the response
from six programmes in LowGroup was that the traditional lecture followed by
tutorial model was adopted. None in HighGroup mentioned this format. All six
programme managers in HighGroup spoke of involving students more actively in
learning compared to two in LowGroup. This response was not only from the
practical and vocational type subjects, but also from the more traditional academic
subjects.

Assessment

The programmes used a variety of forms of assessment, including coursework essays,
individual and group projects, short tests and examinations. Interestingly,
programmes in HighGroup employed formative assessment, in its strict sense of not
contributing towards the final mark, less than LowGroup. Programmes in
HighGroup preferred to utilise formative assessment that also counted towards
students' final grade, a kind of formative/summative assessment.

It is interesting to consider how this finding relates to the literature. Traditionally
summative assessment measures student achievement and formative assessment
enhances learning (Light & Cox, 2001). However, Ramsden (1992) encouraged that
assessment be linked to learning by assessing during the experience of learning as well
as at the end, which is similar to Heywood's (2000) idea of 'assessment-led learning'.
Module leaders appear to have accepted that students are reluctant to put their best
efforts into work that is not going to count. Hence rather than deplore the lack of

commitment among students, they have commended their practical sense and decided to work with it (Brown *et al.*, 1997) by replacing formative assessment during the semester with summative, which would also inform students' learning. This approach is consistent with the more recent findings of Trotter (2006) and in the findings of this study.

Recommendations

While these findings are the result of a case study at one university, the results are relevant to other institutions that may be seeking evidence of activities to enhance the early student experience and influence retention rates. Activities associated with an enhanced early student experience and improved retention are detailed below, organised into suggestions at programme and institution level.

Programme level

Pre-entry.   This case study indicates that programmes with high retention rates are involved in effective and appropriate marketing, including the provision of correct and up-to-date prospectus entries, web pages and leaflets. These programmes have open days, ensuring the target market is informed and invited. They develop links with schools and colleges and are involved in higher education enrichment programmes in order to be aware of and help shape students' expectations of HE. They also ensure late applicants are provided with the appropriate information and time to make their decision.

Induction.   It is apparent that induction should be organized around activities aimed at helping students to get to know one another. Part of induction should be linked to the future study of students. Staff should also use induction week to get to know the students and identify/remedy any initial problems students may have.

Personal tutor support.   The case study indicates that personal tutor meetings should be timetabled regularly in the first semester, reverting to at least once per semester after that. An agenda for the meetings should be provided with an academic link, for example, personal development planning, study skills, review and reflection on assessment results.

The impact of undertaking paid employment and other commitments.   It appears that a timetable which facilitates part-time employment and time for other commitments may contribute to improved retention.

Attendance.   Notwithstanding the other commitments current students may have, an ethos of attendance being a requirement should be encouraged. Attendance needs to be monitored and procedures put in place for contacting absentees.

Teaching and learning activities. Teaching and learning strategies that involve students actively in class are likely to be more successful.

Assessment. The evidence suggests the importance of an element of continuous summative assessment beginning early in the term, accompanied by appropriate feedback.

University level

In order to enhance the early student experience it is essential that senior management overtly shape, support and monitor appropriate coordinated policies and actions. Institutions should involve all departments in HE enrichment programmes. They should coordinate, facilitate and encourage the development of links with local schools and colleges at institutional, departmental and programme levels. Staff development workshops on induction should include a particular emphasis on activities designed to help students integrate. Personal tutorial systems should be adequately resourced, with an agenda of activities that can be followed in personal tutor meetings.

Structuring timetables that facilitate part-time employment and allow students to cope with other commitments appear to support retention. Possibly more important is the publishing of timetables ahead of the semester/academic year, thus allowing students to plan their activities and make appropriate arrangements. Staff education sections should develop a series of staff development workshops on teaching and learning strategies, which will engage a wide range of learning styles and encourage active learning in large and small classes.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to answer the question: in what ways might programmes be run to make them more effective at optimising student achievement and retention? It has questioned whether there are activities inherent on programmes with high student retention and achievement that do not feature as strongly or are not present in those programmes with low student retention and achievement. The results show that there *are* similarities in the way programmes with high retention are run, with these features not being as prevalent in programmes with low retention. The results of this case study therefore assist in providing the evidence (which up until now has not been available) that activities encouraged by practitioner groups to enhance student achievement and retention can actually work.

This case study provides the evidence, previously lacking, that it *is* worthwhile spending time and resources to develop an holistic approach designed to enhance the early student experience. Widening participation does not need to mean a fall in retention rates. A range of factors has been identified here that, in all probability, contribute to improved rates of retention.

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