

Using storyboards to explore the impact of staff development on student retention in higher education

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores how staff engagement and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) can influence student retention outcomes in higher education. Drawing on a detailed research project at Edinburgh Napier University, it highlights the role of academic development in influencing educational practices and outcomes. Through storyboarding sessions with 29 members of staff, this study identifies key themes connecting staff development to student retention, including student engagement techniques, wellbeing support, and practical learning. The paper argues that effective CPD can foster a supportive and inclusive academic environment, enhance teaching methodologies, and improve student engagement and retention. Furthermore, it discusses the various conceptions of CPD, exploring how differing perspectives can affect the nature of staff development activities. By bridging the gap between staff development and student success, this paper offers actionable strategies for universities to navigate societal challenges, enhance their impact, and support both academic staff and students.

Full paper

While the effects of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and staff engagement have been examined in terms of their immediate advantages for educators (Elton, 2009), there exists a complex interplay between these elements and the broader spectrum of student success, including but not limited to retention.

Recent research from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) underscores the complexity of student retention in UK higher education, illustrating the nuanced understanding required to effectively address this issue (Hillman, 2024). This paper points out that non-continuation rates vary significantly across different types of institutions, with well-resourced and selective universities like Oxford and Cambridge exhibiting very low dropout rates compared to others that cater more extensively to non-traditional or online students. This differentiation suggests that staff CPD initiatives should be customised according to the specific contexts of their institutions to enhance effectiveness in student retention.

This aligns with findings from other studies which have found that targeted professional development can significantly influence educational outcomes, including retention (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009). However, the HEPI report also brings to light the fact that while many institutions have policies in place to address student retention, there often remains a gap between policy and practice, exacerbated by inadequate training and support for staff. Thus, there is a clear need for more comprehensive CPD programmes that not only provide training in practical skills like data analysis but also aim to close the gap between institutional retention goals and the day-to-day realities faced by staff and students.

However, there is a notable lack of empirical research specifically examining the direct, causal effects of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) on student retention. This indicates a need for more robust evidence to strengthen the connection between CPD and its outcomes, and to inform relevant policies (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). This study aims to fill this gap, seeking to establish clearer evidence of how staff professional development directly influences the important issue of student retention in higher education.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach, using storyboarding sessions (Barnes, 1996) with 29 members of staff to capture insights into their experiences and perspectives. Storyboards were analysed through thematic analysis, identifying themes that connect staff CPD to student retention. This process began with open coding, developing initial codes that could be descriptive (e.g., "active learning methodologies") or inferential (e.g., "sense of community"). These codes were then reviewed to identify broader themes connecting staff CPD to student retention. Themes include student engagement techniques, wellbeing support, practical learning, and the role of incidental CPD.

Findings

1. **Student engagement and participation.** CPD that enhances engagement techniques, such as problem-based learning and interactive teaching methods, can potentially improve student retention. Active learning experiences foster deeper engagement, increasing satisfaction and commitment.
2. **Wellbeing and support.** Staff training in emotional support and psychological wellbeing helps create a supportive environment. This support reduces dropout rates, directly impacting retention.
3. **Practical and applied learning.** CPD that integrates broader societal applications into teaching enhances relevance, engaging students and increasing persistence.
4. **Self-directed CPD.** A key finding of the study is that if staff feel empowered to identify CPD opportunities for themselves, then they are more likely to use them to enhance their teaching methodologies, directly benefiting their students in the process.
5. **Incidental CPD.** The study also highlights that much CPD happens accidentally or incidentally. This spontaneous learning fosters educational practices, emphasising the need for universities to support and nurture informal learning opportunities.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into how staff CPD initiatives influence educational practices and support student retention. By linking CPD to student success, it offers actionable strategies to enhance teaching methodologies, foster self-directed and incidental learning, and navigate societal challenges. The findings highlight the role of higher education as a space where academic staff can shape curricula, support students, and engage with societal issues through their teaching and development. This research also emphasizes the need for universities to cultivate CPD programs that empower educators to navigate the complex intersection between educational impact and societal engagement, ensuring a supportive and inclusive academic environment for both staff and students. Finally, it underlines the importance of considering how and in what ways staff define professional development activities, which can significantly impact their engagement and the overall educational landscape.

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