

The Open University UK

Who am I and what keeps me going? Profiling the successful distance student. (0139)

Abstract

Student retention and progression has exercised the HE sector for some time now and there has been much research into the reasons why students drop out of Higher Education courses. {Boyle, 2010; Buglear, 2009; Trowler, 2010; Yorke, 1999}. More recently the Higher Education Academy retention grants programme briefing {HEA, 2010}, outlined a number of areas that emergent project data revealed a number of areas as fundamental to retention and progression and include areas outlined by a number of researchers, {Tinto, 2007; Tinto, 2006; Yorke, 1999; Yorke, 2004}, as being ‘essential to student success’: ‘expectations, support, feedback and involvement’ {Tinto, 2009:22}. But there has been less qualitative research into what makes students stay. This small scale qualitative project based in the Open University UK builds upon an intensive institutional research project analysing what type of interventions make a positive difference to student progression and success. The research revealed important factors linking to student identity and concomitant success.

Background

Student retention and progression has exercised the HE sector for some time now and there has been much research into the reasons why students drop out of Higher Education courses. {Boyle, 2010 Buglear, 2009; Trowler, 2010; Yorke, 1999}. More recently the Higher Education Academy retention grants programme briefing {HEA, 2010}, outlined a number of areas that emergent project data revealed to be useful in adding both retention and progression and include areas highlighted by a number of researchers, {Tinto, 2007; Tinto, 2006; Yorke, 1999 ; Yorke, 2004 }, as being ‘essential

to student success'::'expectations, support, feedback and involvement' {Tinto, 2009 #33}.The Open University like many Higher Education Institutions, is rationalizing its provision and adopting a qualification based approach rather than the module based mode of entry that sees students engaging with The University to study a single module.

With some 200 thousand students and 8000 Associate Lecturers and 65% of its courses held online, the University has a wealth of experience and research on student retention and success upon which to draw. However, recent figures reveal that some 40% of students enrolling on level one modules, do not then go on register on another module within a 12 month period. Reasons for this have been investigated both by the institution (Baxter and Martyn 2010) and by a number of researchers within the sector. {Simpson, 2000, Simpson, 2004, Yorke, 1999}Annual withdrawal surveys offer some insights into why students leave, but to date there has been little qualitative research into why students remain: what motivates them to carry on where others drop out within the context of a distance learning environment.

It is hoped that insights gleaned by this small scale case study, will prove useful for campus based universities that are increasing their distance provision.

Research outline

For 12 months University Strategic Focus area 04 – student progression, carried out institutional research to uncover what interventions seemed to be helpful in retaining students and what staff (managers and academics) perceived to be detrimental to student progression and retention. Forty qualitative interviews were carried out, supported by a literature review (Baxter et al 2010). Information gleaned was then used alongside information from the student withdrawal survey, to inform research questions for a small scale qualitative research project which aimed to uncover

insights into what keeps students going and what motivates them to complete a qualification in spite of difficulties: to profile the successful distance learning student. Twelve two hour qualitative interviews were carried out, with students from across the 13 regions and nations of The University. The results were then analysed according to the research questions below.

The research questions emanated from the literature review and internal research carried out to date {Simpson, 2004; Fitzgibbon, 2006; Baxter, 2010; Yorke, 1999; Yorke, 2004).

- 1. In what ways have student expectations influenced the student's progression so far?**
- 2. What factors have had the most influence on student motivation to succeed?**
- 3. What University initiatives have had most positive influence on student motivation to succeed?**
- 4. What have been the major drawbacks to progression between modules and what did the student do to overcome these?**
- 5. What social expectations does the student have with regard to study at the OU and to what extent have these been satisfied?**

Conclusions

The research revealed a number of insights into what is most influential in retaining students both during a module and also in the period between modules. The results revealed that although curriculum structure was important, that interventions made by Associate Lecturers at key points within their study pathway were influential in both attenuating difficulties, whilst also providing opportunities for students to articulate concerns over future studies. The research also revealed areas for development in terms of both lecturer interventions and the role of social networking in the formation of student identities.

References

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