The HERE Project

Higher Education: Retention & Engagement

2008 – 2011

Nottingham Trent University

Bournemouth University

University of Bradford

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Nottingham Trent University

Bournemouth University

University of Bradford

3: Report Authors

Nottingham Trent University (NTU)

Ed Foster, Study Support Co-ordinator (ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk)

Sarah Lawther, Learning & Teaching Officer (sarah.lawther@ntu.ac.uk)

Bournemouth University (BU)

Christine Keenan, Learning & Teaching Fellow (ckeenan@bournemouth.ac.uk)

Natalie Bates, Research Assistant (nbates@bournemouth.ac.uk)

University of Bradford (UoB)

Becka Colley, Dean of Students (becka.colley@bradford.ac.uk)

Ruth Lefever, Research Associate (ruth.lefever@bradford.ac.uk)

4: Other Team Members

The authors would like to thank the following people for their contributions to the HERE Project:

The HERE Project Steering Group

Professor Nigel Hastings, NTU, (Chair 2008-2011)

Professor Chris Pole, NTU, (Chair 2011)

Janet Hanson, BU

Mandi Barron, BU

Professor Geoff Layer, UoB

Other Contributors

Paula Pearson (BU) conducted a pilot for our strand 2 research with 2 nursing courses.

Nick Foard (NTU) conducted some of the more complex statistical work following the first doubters' survey at NTU.

Jane McNeil (NTU) acted as a critical friend during the writing of the final report

Zoe Hollingsworth & Jon Davis were student interns at NTU who helped with data collection and analysis of verbatim student comments. Jon also built the HERE Project website.

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5: Executive Summary

The HERE Project (Higher Education: Retention & Engagement) was part of the HEFCE/ Paul Hamlyn Foundation-funded What Works? Student Retention & Success Programme (2008-2011). Three institutions delivered the project jointly: Nottingham Trent University, Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford.

The HERE Project research was conducted with first year students and investigated two themes associated with student retention and success:

- Strand 1 - The impact that doubting has on retention
- Strand 2 - The impact that individual programme teams can make upon retention

The importance of doubting

Doubting is a perfectly natural response to a new set of circumstances. It would be a rare individual who did not express some form of doubt when faced with the challenges of being a new student. However we are interested in more serious anxieties students may have about coping. We use the term 'doubter' to describe someone who has *doubts that are sufficiently strong to have considered withdrawal*. We therefore use the terms 'doubting' and 'considered withdrawing' interchangeably.

We believe that this may be important in retention studies for two reasons:

Firstly, previous research has shown that more students consider withdrawing than actually do withdraw. Rickinson & Rutherford (1995) found that 21% of students had considered leaving early, Burrows (2010), 40%, yet only around 10% of UK students withdraw from their studies early (NAO 2002, 2007). By implication, there ought to be lessons we can learn from students who doubted, but chose not to withdraw.

Secondly, investigating students' experiences has the potential to provide a valuable insight into prior student transition research. In the US, much of the retention literature stems from Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure (1993).

Tinto's work suggests that those students who are academically and socially engaged (2006) with the institution are more likely to remain in higher education.

Whilst there is extensive literature on student retention in the UK, this has often been conducted on students who have dropped out from university and so there are methodological risks that student answers will be influenced by post hoc rationalisation (Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004; Yorke & Longden, 2004, 2008). Our study provided both quantitative and qualitative data about factors associated with doubting and then tested the impact on subsequent withdrawal or continuation. This approach allows us to map findings to existing retention literature and offer an additional perspective.

The term 'doubter' was drawn from Mackie (2001) who explored the differences between students who had doubted and withdrawn (leavers) and doubted and stayed (doubters). Our use is slightly different; it may be helpful for the reader to note that we identified two groups of students: non-doubters and doubters and also monitored their retention[1]. Therefore, we refer to doubters who continued, doubters who withdrew, non-doubters who continued and non-doubters who withdrew.

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[1]The measure of retention used was the 'continuation rate', used by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). This does "not take progression into account, that is of moving from year 1 to year 2. [It] also ignores course changes within the institution and changes to mode of study. [It] simply looks at whether or not a student is still in HE (registered at an HEI) after a year…". Therefore students who progressed to the second year, were repeating and who had transferred to a course within the same institution were recorded as 'continuing' or 'stayed' (both are used interchangeably in this report for readability and have the same meaning). Students who had left the institution or who had transferred to a different institution were recorded as 'withdrawn' or 'left' (again, we have used both terms for readability and they have the same meaning), although they may still be within the higher education sector at another institution.

The Study

The project team surveyed over 3,000 first year students and staff at the partner institutions. Six large-scale student transition surveys of first year students were completed (March-May 2009, Feb-May 2011), seventeen interviews and three focus groups took place with respondents to these surveys, and ten audits of first year programmes were conducted. The destinations of students who completed the 2009 transition surveys were analysed to identify those factors associated with early withdrawal and retention. Furthermore, the research was informed by literature from the UK, US and Australasia.

The HERE Project team used the student transition surveys to identify key risk factors associated with early withdrawal and key factors associated with retention and engagement. A detailed question set was then developed from these findings and used to audit ten programmes at the three institutions. The programmes were selected as either programmes with excellent rates of retention, or because they were tackling particular issues such as a high numbers of students from higher risk backgrounds.

Using the evidence from the transition surveys and interviews, the team developed a toolkit with nine sets of recommendations for improving retention at programme level.

Executive Summary - Key Findings

Finding a) Approximately one third of first year students have experienced doubts sufficiently strong to make them consider withdrawing at some point during the first year.

We refer throughout this report to students who have considered leaving as doubters, those who have not, as non-doubters.

Figure 1 - Student Transition Survey (2009) – all 3 institutions Percentage of student doubters (n=873)
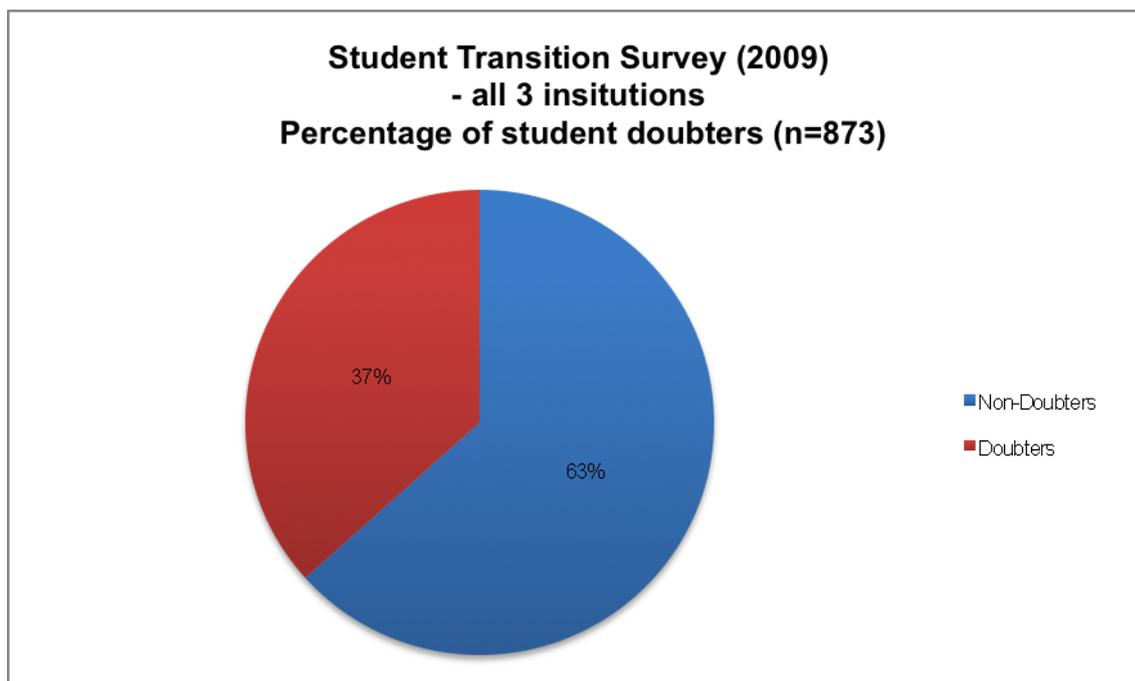
Student Transition Survey (2009) - all 3 insitutions Percentage of student doubters (n=873)

37%

63%

Non-Doubters
Doubters

Finding b) Doubters are more likely to leave than non-doubters.

In the 2009 student transition survey, 483 students granted us permission to track their progress: 98.3% of non-doubters were still at university the following academic

year, whereas only 92.2% of doubters were still at university the following academic year[2]. A small number of students withdrew, despite having no doubts, and they tended to report a positive experience of being at university. Doubting is an important factor when considering retention, but not the only one.

Finding c) Doubters reported a poorer quality experience than students who have not doubted.

Doubters who subsequently withdrew reported the poorest quality experience of all. In contrast, those students who did not doubt tended to report a more positive experience of being at university, they appear to be better engaged (Bryson, Cooper & Hardy, 2010). In particular, they appeared to have better understood the nature of higher education and adapted to it better than doubters. They also report a more interesting academic experience and better relationships with tutors and their peers.

Finding d) Students usually report more than one reason for doubting.

For example, in the 2011 survey, the 280 student doubters across all three partners provided us with 685 reasons for doubting (2.1 per respondent).

Finding e) The primary reasons for doubting are associated with students' experience of the programme.

Confidence about coping with studies appears to be particularly important; in turn, student confidence appears to be influenced by feedback and whether assessment is as the students expected it to be. Other important reasons to doubt include student lifestyle and accommodation, doubts about the future benefits of the course and finance.

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[2] Student continuation aggregated from all three institutions. In total there were 301 non-doubters (296 continued) and 182 doubters (166 continued).

Finding f) There were four main reasons cited by doubters for staying.

There were, however, some institutional variations. The first factor was 'support from friends and family'. The second was 'adapting to the course/ university', the third the student's 'personal commitment and drive' and the fourth was whether the students perceived the programme can help them achieve 'future goals, particularly employment'. 'Support from friends and family' was particularly complex and, at times, paradoxically, appeared to be undervalued by students.

Finding g) The primary times for considering leaving are immediately before and after Christmas.

As these are the times when most first years encounter their first set of coursework deadlines and feedback, this appears to support the evidence that the primary reasons for doubting are academic related. Less than 5% of our respondents indicated that they had considered withdrawing prior to starting university. It may be that students with strong early doubts had already withdrawn, but in our study, doubting pre-arrival was not a major factor.

Finding h) Students reported different degrees of doubting.

In the 2009 survey, if a student stated that they were a doubter, they were asked to state whether they had subsequently decided to stay, were not sure about staying or had decided to leave. Amongst student doubters, those who had doubted but decided to stay had the best rate of continuation. Even amongst the small number of students who had doubts and had decided to leave, not all students actually withdrew.

Finding i) Some student groups appear more likely to doubt than others.

There were variations between the three institutions[3]. Part-time students, students with disabilities and female students tended to be more likely to doubt. Female students were more likely to doubt, but less likely to withdraw. Students living in private halls and living independently for the first time were also more likely to have doubts. There was a mixed picture for students from different ethnic backgrounds and ages.

Executive Summary - Key Recommendations

There are nine broad recommendations from the HERE Project to improve student retention and success. The recommendations are primarily at programme level and are particularly focussed on the first year.

They are grouped into two fields:

- Manage those factors that lead to doubting, and therefore leaving
- Support students to stay

Some of the nine recommendations, for example 'engagement', 'belonging' and 'social integration', are closely related. However, we believe that there are distinct points about each that mean there is value to keeping them separate. Further information can be found in sections 13 and 14 and in the HERE Project toolkit.

There is some overlap between the themes and they fall into two main groups:

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[3] This may be in part because the different sample sizes between the institutions led to some groups being small in size. See Appendix 8 for further details.

Manage those factors associated with doubting, and therefore leaving

Recommendation 1) Identify and respond to students at risk

- Those programmes surveyed in the Strand 2 research had often identified those students more at risk of withdrawing early and had adopted strategies for supporting them. We recommend that all programmes review their retention data to focus on key groups or key times of the year and then consider strategies for targeting further support appropriately.

Recommendation 2) Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university

- Doubters appear less confident about coping with their studies and are less likely to understand the differences between post-16 and higher education. We therefore recommend developing and extending induction, more explicitly helping students to learn how to learn and very importantly, boosting students' confidence by supporting students to understand the expectations of assessment in HE, improving feedback mechanisms, and helping students to learn from feedback.

Recommendation 3) Improve the communication and relationship with staff

- Doubters feel more distant from their teaching staff than their non-doubting peers. This appears to be connected to their confidence about coping. We recommend improving communication with first year students by designing the curriculum with more contact points in the first year and actively discussing expectations with students.

Recommendation 4) Help students make more informed decisions about choosing the right course in the first place

- One of the most common academic reasons cited by students for considering withdrawing was that they found the course was not as they expected. Those students who perceived the information about the course to be inaccurate were

more likely to be doubters. In this light, we recommend that programme teams review their pre-arrival communication and activities such as open days.

Support Students to Stay

Recommendation 5) Improve social integration

- Although, at times, undervalued by the student respondents, social integration appears a very powerful factor in helping students to remain. Furthermore, it also underpins 'developing a sense of belonging' and 'engagement with the curriculum' factors. We recommend starting the process before students arrive with social networking, and creating social opportunities in the curriculum during induction and throughout the first year.

Recommendation 6) Improve a sense of belonging to the programme

- Doubters felt less like they fitted in to their programme than non-doubters. We recommend developing a sense of belonging through increased social engagement within the curriculum (Yorke & Longden, 2008) and through lecturers being seen to know their students and demonstrably valuing their input.

Recommendation 7) Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can help achieve their future goals

- Doubters also reported that they were less likely to believe that completing their degree would help them achieve their future goals. We suggest that helping students to see future career destinations after the course and positive feedback on students' progress will help all students, particularly doubters.

Recommendation 8) Encourage students' active engagement with the curriculum

- Doubters report lower levels of satisfaction with a wide range of factors associated with engagement. Our work suggests that doubters are less likely to find the subject intrinsically interesting, but more likely to be motivated by interesting learning and teaching activities.

Recommendation 9) Ensure that there is good communication and access to additional student support

- A number of doubter interviewees reported the importance to them of access to additional support. We recommend that programme teams are even more explicit about what further support is available and that institutions ensure that there are clearly defined routes to additional support.

These themes are developed further in section 13. More detailed supporting evidence can be found in section 14 and the appendix. We have tried to retain the same structure in all three sections. In the executive summary, point a refers to the number of doubters in our surveys. 13a provides further detail and 14a provides information about the individual institutions.

6: Summary of the What Works? Student Retention & Success Programme

This report is a project output as part of the What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme. This three year evaluative programme has been initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The seven projects in the programme, involving 22 Higher Education Institutions, have been evaluating effective strategies and interventions to ensure high continuation and completion rates. The projects have been working to generate practical outputs including reports that enhance practice and associated toolkits and resources to assist other institutions to learn from their work and improve student retention and success. It is anticipated that the outputs of this programme will be particularly significant in the context of the current changes facing higher education.

7: Concise Abstract

The HERE Project (2008-2011) was a joint project conducted by Nottingham Trent University, Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford. It investigated two areas that impacted upon student retention and success:

- The impact of doubting upon retention
- The impact that individual programmes can make upon retention

The research was conducted with first year students. 3,000 students responded to surveys and interviews and 10 programmes were audited.

Key findings

a. Approximately one third of first year students have experienced doubts sufficiently strong to make them consider withdrawing

b. Student doubters are more likely to leave than non-doubters

c. Student doubters report having a poorer quality university experience than non-doubters

d. Students usually have more than one reason for doubting

e. The primary reasons for doubting are associated with students' experience of the programme

f. The main reasons for staying were support from friends and family, adapting to the course/ university, student's personal commitment and drive and how the programme will help students achieve future goals, particularly employment

g. The primary times for doubting are immediately before and after Christmas. Very few respondents in our survey (March – May 2011) had expressed doubts prior to starting university.

h. Students reported differing degrees of doubt. Even amongst the strongest doubters, not all departed.

i. Some student groups appear more likely to doubt than others.

Key recommendations

The HERE Project recommends nine actions to improve retention and success. These are based on the research into doubters and the actions carried out by the audited programmes. It is important to note that the programmes dealt with the themes in a number of different ways based on their own expertise and the nature of the students. The recommendations can be grouped into two fields:

- Manage those factors that lead to doubting and subsequently leaving

- Improve those factors that help students to stay

Under these two main factors are a series of supporting recommendations:

Manage those factors that lead to doubting and subsequently leaving

1. Identify and respond to students at risk

2. Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university

3. Improve the relationship and communication with staff

4. Help students make more informed decisions about choosing the right course in the first place

Improve those factors that help students to stay

5. Improve social integration

6. Improve a sense of belonging to the programme

7. Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can help achieve their future goals

8. Encourage students' active engagement with the curriculum

9. Ensure that there is good communication and access to additional student support

Overall, we recommend that programmes adapt the main themes to suit their local contexts, rather than unquestioningly follow our recommendations.

8: Evaluation topics covered by the HERE Project

The HERE Project set out to evaluate two topics:

- The impact of doubting on student retention
- The impact that individual programmes can make upon retention

Due to existing experience in transition, induction and the first year experience, we concentrated on first year students.

Due to the large-scale nature of the surveys, we also were able to examine some aspects of the experience of the following groups:

a. Part-time students, students with disabilities and female students were more likely to doubt.

b. Part time students were also more likely to withdraw[4] although female students were actually less likely to do so.

c. Students living in private halls and living independently for the first time were also more likely to have doubts.

d. There was a mixed picture for students from different ethnic backgrounds and ages.

Most respondents to the surveys were full-time students. However, a limited number were from part-time courses and we are able to comment a little on the experience of these students. Finally, we examined a number of programmes to explore their practices to support student retention and success. Programme teams were interviewed and students surveyed to identify what these programmes did to impact positively on student retention and success. However, we found common practices across disciplines and so have emphasised good academic practices more generally rather than reporting on good academic practices by subject.

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[4] Although the numbers of part-time students were very low

9: Aims and objectives of the evaluation

The HERE Project was based around two fundamental questions, one based on literature and the other on an observation whilst conducting earlier research into retention. As such we were not seeking to test an existing process or service, but entered the research with a very open mind about those factors that would arise.

- Strand 1: What impact does doubting have on student retention?
- Strand 2: What differences are there between first year programmes and how do they impact upon retention?

Strand 1: What impact does doubting have on student retention?

Why do some students have doubts about their studies but stay, when others leave? What can institutions learn from these doubters who remain to improve retention?

Starting university is, for most students, a significantly different academic and social experience to that which they have encountered before. Anxiety and doubt must therefore be a perfectly normal response to these changed circumstances. However, if a student has doubts that are sufficiently strong that they consider leaving their course or university, what impact does this have on their retention? Do they actually leave, or do they manage to work through their reasons for doubting? Throughout this report, we have used the term 'doubter' as shorthand to describe a student who has doubts that they are on the right course or at the right university that are *serious enough to consider withdrawing*. We therefore use the terms 'doubting' and 'considered withdrawing' interchangeably. Previous studies into doubting suggest that there are two to three times more students who consider withdrawing than actually withdraw. Two UK studies found between 21% (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995) and 39% of students (Roberts et al, 2003) had doubts. In 2008, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) reported that 33% of students answering the AUSSE survey seriously considered leaving. In the UK, early withdrawal rates

are fairly static, with approximately 10% of students leaving early in the first year (National Audit Office 2007). This suggests that there is a large body of students who have doubts, but through personal drive, adaptation or other reasons, remain.

Objectives

We therefore set out to survey large numbers of students to explore:

- Why do some students have doubts about their programme?
- What keeps doubters on their course, why don't all doubters leave?
- Are doubters actually any more likely to subsequently leave?
- Can we learn anything from how doubters have coped with university that can prevent other students from leaving early?

In our original proposal we stated that:

"We will be successful if we better understand why doubters stay, learn lessons that can be transferred to help prevent more students leave and make effective recommendations for institutions to embed into first year working practices."

Strand 2: Differences between first year programmes

What do programmes with excellent rates of retention do that keeps students at university, and how do these make a difference?

High entry qualifications appear to be the strongest predictor of academic progression (NAO 2002, 2007) so logically programmes with higher rates of retention are often also those with higher entry qualifications. However, in 2004, researchers at NTU conducted institutional data analysis. Whilst there was a general trend towards better retention amongst programmes with higher entry qualifications, there were many exceptions. In particular, it was noted that amongst programmes with an entry tariff of 240 UCAS points, progression rates to the second year varied between 100% and 79%. This appeared to suggest that, whilst entry qualifications are important, there may also be the possibility of individual programmes being able to

influence progression too.

We therefore sought to explore the individual practices of programmes with good rates of retention. Our goal was to identify whether or not particular practices positively or negatively influenced retention. For example, was it due to good practices in induction, learning and teaching or motivational factors such as promoting future employability?

In our original proposal we stated that:

"We will succeed if we are able to accurately demonstrate the factors that actually impact positively on student retention and produce an audit tool for programmes to review their own practice."

Outputs

We proposed by the end of the project to produce the following outputs:

- A series of recommendations to improve practice based upon the answers to our research questions

Resources, most notably a 'HERE Project Toolkit', to help staff reflect upon their own working practices and consider strategies for improving retention and success.

10: Institutional Context

The three universities involved in the HERE Project had previously collaborated in the Learnhigher CETL (2005 – 2010). During this time, the three project leads had discussed and shared good practice about student transition into the first year. These activities and initiatives included:

Bournemouth University

The University has developed a range of pre-arrival activities to help students acclimatise to learning in higher education. The project, Stepping Stones 2HE was widely implemented across the University (Keenan, 2008).

University of Bradford

Bradford has extensively used social media to help prepare students to cope with the demands of learning at university and implemented a programme of early self-analysis to encourage students to reflect upon their developmental needs (Develop Me!, Currant & Currant 2008).

Nottingham Trent University

In 2005, NTU recognised that the institutional welcome to the university needed to be enhanced. A new programme of activities, Welcome Week, was implemented to replace Freshers' Week. Welcome Week enhanced the range of social opportunities for students and also provided a research opportunity to explore transition and induction into the university. Furthermore, it was used as a driver to improve programme induction. Early student retention improved and dramatic changes to the course inductions were noted (Foster, Lawther & McNeil 2010). In October 2008, the Welcome Week evaluation survey was used to pilot our questions about doubting. In

2011, the survey was used to identify where students had made friends early in the first year.

As the three lead staff members had expertise in transition and the first year, it was decided that the HERE Project would concentrate on level one students.

Each partner has hosted internal learning and teaching events that have concentrated on aspects of the HERE Project's work. For example, in September 2009, BU hosted a large learning and teaching event concentrating on first year retention. Each September since 2008, NTU has hosted a Student Writing in Transition Symposium at which representatives from the three institutions have disseminated research findings. HERE project findings have also been shared at internal learning and teaching events.

At NTU retention is embedded into a number of spheres of work, the most relevant of which is the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy. The rationale for this is that a good learning and teaching environment will positively support retention. In particular, Section 3 of NTU's Learning & Teaching Enhancement Strategy (Enhancing Student Academic Support Systems) was strongly influenced by early findings from the HERE Project. It contains institutional commitments to 'further develop plans to support all students in developing their academic practice', 'enhance programme design … to enable all students … to make a successful transition to and within HE…', to further develop Welcome Week and further develop programme inductions. Whilst these were not exclusively developed as a consequence of the HERE Project, our findings provided evidence that reinforced their importance.

Changes to institutional practices as a consequence of the HERE Project Work

Bournemouth University

There have been a number of initiatives to improve transition and orientation activities to ensure community building and a sense of belonging at an earlier stage; some of which are partly based on the HERE findings. These include a student voice project, a student experience committee, and a new PVC post with responsibility for student experience, education and professional practice.

University of Bradford

UoB has used the findings from the HERE Project to implement a number of key strategies. These include developing a new Personal Academic Tutoring framework (for 2010/11). The research has also helped to guide current student experience evaluations; findings are therefore shaping the institution via new School Enhancement Plans and other student experience strategies/policies. This work is co-ordinated by the Dean of Students who will be working with the academic schools in key areas such as: feedback, induction, course handbooks and academic support. It is also our intention to share our findings with the student body and explain how we are adapting services to better meet their needs.

It is also intended to take aspects of particular interest to the UoB context and will be explored further. This has already been taking place with regards to the 'belonging' aspect of the findings, via further HEA funding to examine student engagement and belonging on campus and how to improve spaces and potentially enhance the sense of inclusion and belonging of students.

In addition, it is important to note that the collaborations with the partner institutions have allowed ideas and practice to be shared effectively – for example the Induction Guide at NTU and pre-entry tasks at BU.

Nottingham Trent University

To ensure the sustainability of the work, the primary responsibility of the HERE Project researcher at NTU is to embed the HERE Project findings within the institution. From 2011-12 onwards, she will use the HERE Project Toolkit as the basis for staff development activity with programme teams. In 2011-12, she will work with six programmes and cascade findings across the university in a series of workshops and briefings.

NTU is improving the support offered to first year students by developing a series of tutorials for all new students at the University. The scheme will be piloted in 2011-12 and fully implemented in 2012-13. The tutorials will be taught to small groups of between 8 and 12 students. They are intended to concentrate on orientation to HE, developing approaches to learning, encouraging friendships and developing a sense of belonging to, and cohesion within, the programme. It is proposed that there will be frequent tutorials over the course of the year and whilst the programme will vary across the different academic schools, the structure will be strongly influenced by the HERE Project findings about when and why students have doubts.

The Nottingham Trent University staff who participated in the study were extremely interested in our work and have reported changing practices as a consequence of taking part. The interview process encouraged them to reflect on their own working practices and consider what they did well and identified areas for development. Both programme teams have expressed interest in working with us in the future as we embed practices across the university in coming years.

Figure 2 - First year retention at the partner institutions (most recent HESA data)

Continuation following year of entry: Full-time first degree entrants	
Institution	**2008/09**
Nottingham Trent University	93.70%
Benchmark	91.90%
Continuation rate amongst HERE Project sample (n=370)	*95.70%*
Bournemouth University	93.70%
Benchmark	91.40%
Continuation rate amongst HERE Project sample (n=52)	*94.23%*
University of Bradford	88.50%
Benchmark	89.90%
Continuation rate amongst HERE Project sample (n=61)	*96.72%*
Sources: HESA data & HERE Project Research http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2064&Itemid=141	

The continuation amongst respondents to the HERE Project Student Transition Surveys (2009) is better than amongst the student body as a whole. It appears that by responding to the surveys and granting permission to track progress, students may be slightly more motivated and engaged than the average first year. Also the sample size is small. In total, 873 students responded to the 2009 transition surveys.

Of these, just over half (483) granted us permission to track their progress. However, even the largest sample (NTU) accounts for just over 6% of the first year cohort.

11: Details of interventions, policies or practices being evaluated

Unlike the other 6 projects in the 'What Works? Student Retention & Success' programme, the HERE Project did not set out to specifically test existing institutional practices. Our interests were in exploring two phenomena that appeared to have an impact upon retention.

The two strands were:

- The impact of student doubting on retention

- The impact that individual programmes can make upon retention

Strand 1 Research – Student doubters

The Strand 1 research looked at why some students stay and others leave and in particular:

- Why do some students have doubts about their programme?
- What keeps doubters on their course, why don't all doubters leave?
- Are doubters actually any more likely to subsequently leave?
- Can we learn anything from how doubters have coped with university that can prevent other students from leaving early?

Strand 2 Research – Programme impact

Ten programme audits of programmes were conducted. These were with programmes that were performing excellently at retaining students, or those tackling particular issues, such as a student cohort containing high numbers of students from higher risk backgrounds. The audits were conducted to identify what these programmes did to impact positively on student retention and success.

The findings of both strands informed the development of a 'HERE Project Toolkit' for programmes to review their own practice in terms of student retention and success.

12: Methods of evaluation

The evaluation was conducted in five broad stages:

Stage 1 – Pilot studies

One large-scale student survey about doubting in post-16 education, a series of interviews with withdrawn students and a survey of staff and students on two comparable courses were conducted. A literature review was conducted, drawing upon the UK, US and Australasian research.

Stage 2 - Student Transition Survey (2009) with follow up focus groups and interviews

A student transition survey was conducted at all three institutions. Student focus groups and interviews were conducted to provide more in depth information about the key themes that arose from the survey about the answers provided.

Stage 3 – Monitoring the destination of students

The destination of respondents was monitored to test the impact of doubting on retention.

Stage 4 – Programme audits

Using the data gathered from the first 3 stages and a literature review, the HERE team developed an audit tool and used it with ten academic programmes. Interviews were conducted with programme staff and surveys were conducted with students.

Stage 5 – Student Transition Survey 2011

The HERE Project team then developed a second transition survey based upon the findings from the earlier stages.

The project team considered issues of reliability, validity and ethics throughout the project. The research process was documented throughout, noting limitations to the research and any methodological issues that arose. The project team drew upon and make reference to, relevant research and literature. The findings were reported with an awareness of the limitations of the research.

The project used triangulation, different methods of data collection, in each of the two strands to add rigour and depth to the research. In the majority of cases, the key themes are those that were found across the three institutions.

Ethical clearance was granted for the research at the lead institution; the project team followed the requirements of this throughout.

The evaluation methods are described below and have been separated into their separate strands for clarity:

Figure 3 - Overview of the research process

Year	Strand One Research Activity	Strand Two Research Activity	Other Project Activity
2008-09	- Pilot study - NTU (Oct) - Student Transition Survey (March – May) - Focus groups and interviews with doubters (May – June) - Pilot Study by Bournemouth University Students Union (June)	Pilot study with two nursing programmes – BU (Nov – Dec)	- Literature review conducted - Analysis of literature review and Student Transition Survey to develop general understanding (June)
2009-10	- Focus groups and interviews with doubters (Oct - Dec) - Further analysis of continuation of respondents to Student	10 programme audits conducted at all three institutions (Oct - June)	HERE Project Toolkit development

	Transition Survey (Dec – Jan)		
2010-11	• Student Transition Survey (Feb – May) • Analysis of more nuanced set of questions about doubting	• Case Studies written up	• HERE Project Toolkit development • Data analysis conducted for publications

Strand 1

Literature review

The Project Team reviewed relevant literature, in particular literature on retention from the UK, USA and Australasia.

Doubters' Pilot Survey (October 2008)

A pilot study was conducted at NTU in October 2008. All new students were asked via an online questionnaire whether they had considered withdrawing from their prior courses of study. If they had, or had actually withdrawn, they were asked follow up questions about the factors involved. There was a 16% response rate (1,059 students). Students gave different reasons for considering withdrawing (or actually withdrawing) than the reasons they gave for remaining on their course[5]. This was explored further in the student transition survey 2009 and is a strong theme of the project.

Student Transition Survey March-May 2009

Student Experience Factors

All first year students at each institution were invited to respond to an online survey offered between March and May 2009. Students were presented with 17 statements about the learning and living experience (Student Experience Factors). These were based on prior studies into student retention (including Yorke and Longden 2008)

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[5] Withdrawal from college appeared to be primarily about the combination of a poor match between the students' goals and the reality of studying and their motivation to continue (robustness) when faced with what they perceived to be an uninteresting learning environment. Continuing appeared to be primarily about the motivation stemming from future goals and the social/ professional/ familial support made available to students.

and findings from the pilot study. They were asked to rate both the importance of each factor and their experience of it using a scale of 1-5, where 1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree'[6]. Factors included issues such as:

- My subject is interesting

- My fellow students are supportive

Students were also asked a number of other questions in areas such as accommodation, communication from the University or understanding the differences between prior studies and university.

Students were also asked whether or not they had considered withdrawing at any point during the first year. They were given the following options:

- 'no, I have never considered withdrawing'

- 'yes and I have decided to stay'

- 'yes and I have decided to leave'

- 'yes, but I haven't made up my mind about my future plans'

Students who answered 'yes, but I have decided to stay ' were then asked 'what has helped you decide to stay on your course?' and 'please tell us what made you consider leaving'.

It was decided, for ethical reasons, not to ask these latter two questions to students who had decided to leave, or who were not sure about whether to stay.

Analysis

There were two stages of analysis of the 2009 survey data. The first stage looked at *all* students who completed the survey. The second stage looked at students who

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[6] See appendix 1

gave the researchers permission to track their grades and enrolment status. This was a smaller sample size (as not all students gave permission) but allowed us to record the destination of these students.

We therefore were able to analyse differences between:

1) Non-doubters who continued

2) Non-doubters who withdrew

3) Doubters who continued

4) Doubters who withdrew

Figure 4 - Student Transition Survey (2009) – all institutions

Transition Survey 2009	NTU	Bournemouth University	University of Bradford
Total responses	656 students (9% of the first year)	89 students (3% of the first year)	128 students (5% of the first year)
Respondents who granted permission to track progress	370 students (56% of our sample)	52 students (58% of our sample)	61 students (48% of our sample)

Quantitative Analysis of the 2009 Student Transition Survey

It was decided that because of the differences in sample sizes and the differing nature of each institution that the quantitative data would be analysed per institution (rather than look at all the responses as one sample). This would also allow comparisons between each institution.

In addition, further statistical analysis was carried out at NTU because the larger data set allowed further statistical tests. A Cramer's V test was applied to the 17

Student Experience Factors (for all 656 respondents) to see whether there was an association between these variables and *doubting*. A logistic regression was also carried out on this larger NTU data set[7]. This looked at differences between *doubters and non-doubters*. A factor analysis was carried out on the larger data set to enable the researcher to narrow down the 17 Student Experience Factors into smaller categories to make data analysis more manageable. This found three underlying factors from the initial 17 Student Experience Factors. These three new factors were used in the logistic regression analysis described above (thus looking at *doubting* and these factors). A Cramer's V test was also applied to those students who granted us permission to track their progress (370 NTU students). This gave an indication of association between *continuation* and a number of demographic factors. In addition, box plots were created to illustrate patterns between students' destinations and their factor analysis scores for this smaller sample[8]. This further analysis also looked at whether there was a correlation between student responses to the statement *'I feel confident I can cope with my studies'* and their responses to the other 16 Student Experience Factors.

Qualitative Analysis of the Student Transition Survey

The answers to the open questions in 2009, *'What has helped you decide to stay on your course'* and *'Please tell us what made you consider leaving'*, were coded into themes by two independent researchers at NTU using the approach described by Creswell, 2007, of a *'data analysis spiral'* (Creswell, 2007, p150). The codes developed at NTU were then used by Bradford and Bournemouth to code their answers to this question. In the analysis of responses, we had to deal with more than one reason per student. The figures therefore indicate the number of times a reason was given, rather than the number of students.

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[7] Statistical tests were limited because it was not a random sample.
[8] For further details please see Appendix 4.

The qualitative and quantitative findings from the strand one research indicated that there were nine main areas that impacted upon student retention and success. These nine areas formed the basis of our strand two research with programmes.

Limitations of Survey Data

There may be a non-response bias; students who are having doubts about being at university may not be engaged enough in university life to fill in a university survey. Students who have had doubts and decided to stay, or who have never had doubts, may be over represented here.

When we asked the students to give reasons why they had had doubts and thought of leaving, and why they had decided to stay, the reasons given were not weighted by students. In the 2009 survey students were not asked about the strength or date[9] of doubting.

The analysis also did not include combinations of reasons to doubt and leave (it was beyond the scope of this project) for example, whether mental health issues and accommodation are commonly cited together as reasons to leave.

The initial draft of the interview questions was based on an analysis of the first (larger) data set (therefore looking at doubting rather than leaving) and an analysis of qualitative data (from focus groups and interviews). An analysis of the second (smaller) data set supported our initial draft in that it indicated that students who have had doubts are more likely to leave and gave more detail to the initial themes.

Focus groups and interviews

Themes arising from the online survey were explored in more detail in focus groups and interviews during 2009/10 at each institution.

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[9] Students were asked about the strength and time of doubting in the 2011 survey.

NTU

Students who had agreed to take part in further research in the student transition survey (2009) were contacted by email and invited to take part in a focus group to talk more about their experiences. They were each given a £15 Tesco voucher at the end of the session. There were three focus groups and an interview (six non-doubters and seven doubters).

Four of the doubters were mature students, one was a mature international student, one was an international student and one was a home student with English as a second language. All the participants were female and full time students. This reflected the profile of students who volunteered to take part.

University of Bradford

Thirteen students were interviewed from the 71 who agreed to participate further in research. Due to the limited time frame one-to-one interviews were conducted not focus groups. Interviews lasted from 25 minutes to over an hour. Participants were given a £10 Amazon voucher after the interviews took place. Participants were from a variety of courses/schools and covered a good range of demographic variables, although no part-time students are included.

These interviews took place during the 2009-10 academic year and so were conducted with doubters who had continued. In the previous spring, only one student was self-described as a doubter. However, during the interviews a number revealed and discussed doubts they had felt and then how and why they had decided to remain at university. Participants were therefore re-grouped to reflect this; with 8 having doubts but staying and 5 having no doubts..

Bournemouth University

Twenty one student doubters who agreed to be contacted regarding further participation in the research were e-mailed and three interviews were arranged as a result between December 2009 and February 2010.

The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour and a half in length, and enabled an in-depth reflection on the students' first year experience and how they had coped with their doubts. Non-doubters and students who had withdrawn were not contacted for interview as part of the research at BU. The interviewees were all studying full-time and had applied to university through the standard UCAS process.

Bournemouth University Students' Union study June 2009

A further small qualitative study was carried out by the BUSU in June that explored the involvement of students in voluntary and community activities. Findings were limited and are referred to in the 2009-10 interim report.

Transition Survey 2011

A further online survey was sent to first year students from the 2010-11 cohort across the three institutions between February and May 2011. This (shorter) survey asked about areas that had arisen from the first two years of the project that were worthy of further exploration such as the strength and times of doubting.

Figure 5 - Transition Survey (2011) – all 3 institutions

NTU	Bournemouth University	University of Bradford
452 student respondents (6% response rate)	172 student respondents (5.5% response rate	439 student respondents (13.6% response rate)

Strand Two

Pilot study

A pilot study was carried out at Bournemouth University in November and December 2008 to explore issues of retention in two BSC/Adv Dip Nursing (Adult) programmes. Qualitative methods were used to explore the first year experience of students on both courses, including a questionnaire completed by students and semi-structured interviews with staff. The study helped to highlight key themes and to further develop the methodology for the programme research.

Programme research

Ten programme audits were carried out. Where possible, programmes were chosen for one of two reasons:

- Higher retention rates; we used the 2007/08 institutional data to decide which programmes to review. However, where possible, data sets from 2008-09 and 2009-2010 were also used to show consistent high retention or changes over time (particularly if a programme's retention rates have improved). In order to identify higher than peer rates of retention we also considered, where possible, UCAS entry points, and numbers of clearing and repeating students. If the programme data was available, we also considered other relevant demographic factors (such as gender, mature students).

- The second group were chosen because they were working to overcome a particular problem/ appeared to be coping with particular issues, for example had a high proportion of mature students.

Where possible we have tried to analyse comparable programmes at all three partners.

Methodology

Staff interviews

The findings (from Strand 1) were used to develop interview questions for the programme teams to explore what works in these programmes to support retention and success. An Appreciative Inquiry approach was used. This approach "…focuses on identifying and developing what works in an organisation rather than trying to fix what doesn't" (Dovestone and Keenaghan, 2006, p5). It was used to explore what programmes do best to support retention and success in the nine areas identified in

the strand one research. Programmes were asked in particular about specific practices and examples.

It was decided that two sets of review questions would be developed.

The first, shorter set, contained an outline of question areas for programme teams and was sent in advance of the interviews to help teams prepare. Early research findings were also shared to help interviewees understand the reasoning behind our questions and informally disseminate our research. We found that this approach encouraged discussion with the interviewees.

The actual interviews were conducted using a more detailed version of the questions sent to programme teams.

Documentary analysis

Where possible, a selection of course documents for each programme was analysed, to gain further understanding about how course teams enhance the student experience.

Student survey

A short online student survey was sent to all students in each programme. It asked students about their experience at university so far, to consolidate evidence provided by programme teams.

Case studies

Findings from each programme review have been written as a case study. Each case study includes the context of the programme, course data, programme staff and student research findings, examples of practice, document analysis and summary.

See Appendix 3 for further information about the programmes.

Figure 6 - Programmes participating in HERE Project Strand 2 Research

Case Study	Institution	Brief Details
1	Bournemouth University	Large business programme with sandwich placement, recently improved rate of retention
2	Bournemouth University	Medium sized full time programme in School of Design, Engineering & Computing, recently seen significant increase in numbers and changed pastoral support system
3	Bournemouth University	Small programme in School of Health & Social Care, professional course with high rate of retention
4	Bournemouth University	Small programmes in School of Applied Sciences, STEM subject
5	University of Bradford	Medium sized management programme, non-sandwich route with 25% international students
6	University of Bradford	Large programme from School of Lifelong Education & Development, 25% part-time cohort, large number of mature and local students
7	University of Bradford	Suite of six programmes from School of Computing, Informatics & Media, STEM subject, low entry tariff

8	University of Bradford	Medium programme from School of Life Sciences, STEM subject, professionally accredited, high retention rates
9	Nottingham Trent University	Small programme from College of Business, Law & Social Sciences, low entry tariff, with high proportion of local and mature students
10	Nottingham Trent University	Very large programme from College of Business, Law & Social Sciences, professionally accredited

13: Key messages arising from your evaluation

Key Findings

Finding a) Approximately one third of first year students have experienced doubts sufficiently strong to make them consider withdrawing at some point during the first year.

In the October 2008 pilot study conducted at NTU, 243 of the 1,059 first year respondents, (23%) told us that they had either considered withdrawing, or had actually withdrawn from their course immediately prior to starting at NTU[10].

In 2009, in the student transition surveys conducted at the partner institutions, 320 of the 873 first year respondents (37%) stated that they had had doubts that were sufficiently strong to have considered withdrawing at some point during the first year. The number of doubters varied between institutions. In 2009, 37% of students at NTU expressed doubts as did 45% at Bournemouth and 29% at Bradford (see section 14a).

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[10] These students were therefore studying A levels and other post-16 qualifications.

Figure 7 - Student Transition Survey (2009) – all 3 institutions Percentage of student doubters (n=873)
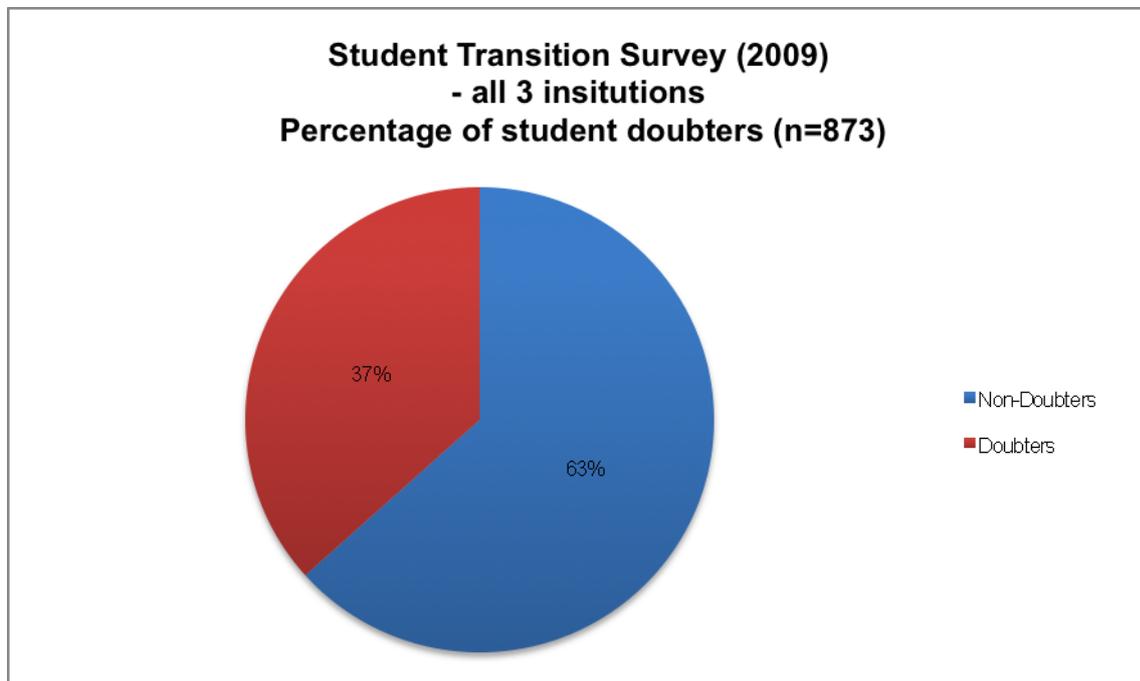
In the 2011 student transition surveys, 339 of the 1,063 respondents (32%) stated that they had had sufficient doubts to have considered withdrawing, noticeably lower than 2009.

Figure 8 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – all 3 institutions Percentage of student doubters (n=1,063)

Student Transition Survey (2011) - all 3 institutions Percentage of student doubters (n=1,063)

- 32% Doubters
- 68% Non-doubters

■ Non-doubters
■ Doubters
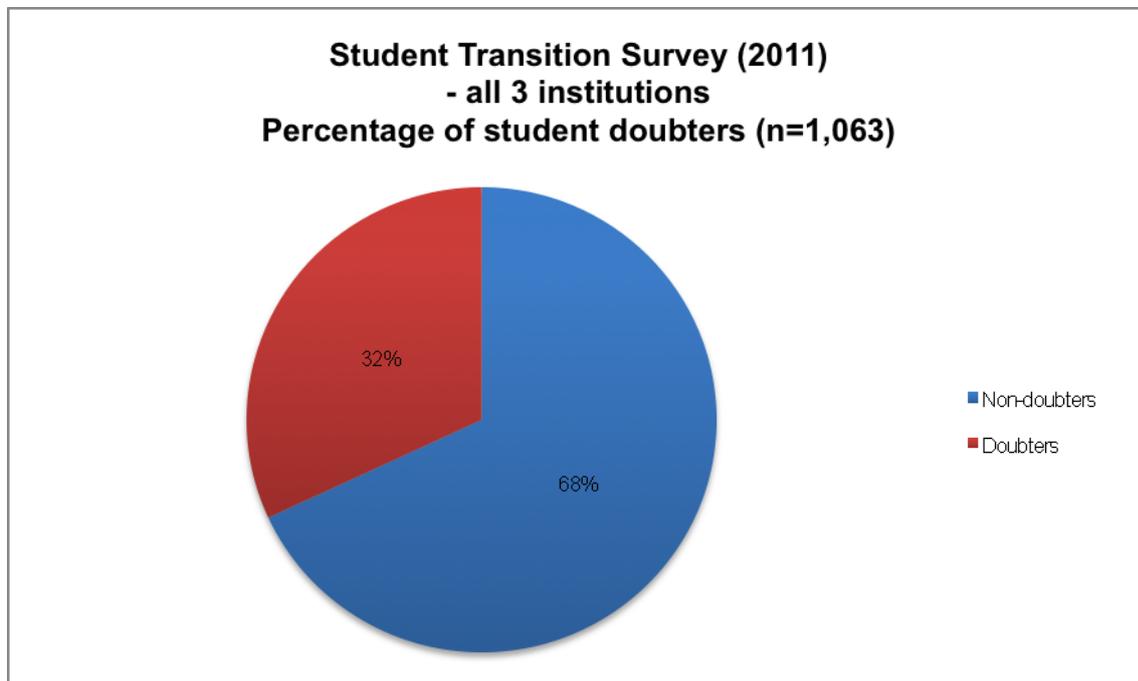
Our findings are in line with previous studies (Rickinson & Rutherford, (1995), Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998). We would suggest that for approximately 2/3 of students, the university experience sufficiently matches their expectations and personal goals and, as a consequence, they are satisfied with the experience. However, for a significant minority, it appears that there are problems with aspects of the university experience that are strong enough for them to have serious doubts. We discuss these further in 13c.

Finding b) Doubters are more likely to leave than non-doubters.

In the 2009 Student Transitions Survey (March – May 2009), 483 students granted us permission to track their progress. In December 2009, we investigated whether or not these students were still at university in the following academic year. Some students had withdrawn, but most were still at the university they started at in September 2008. Most had progressed into the second year, however a number were repeating the first year, or had transferred to another course within the university. We therefore use the term continuation, rather than progression, to indicate students who are still at university.

Continuation of Student Doubters

Amongst doubters, 166 of the 182 students (92%) had progressed to the second year, transferred courses or were repeating the first year.

Figure 9 - The impact of doubting on continuation, tested December 2009 – all 3 institutions

(n=182)
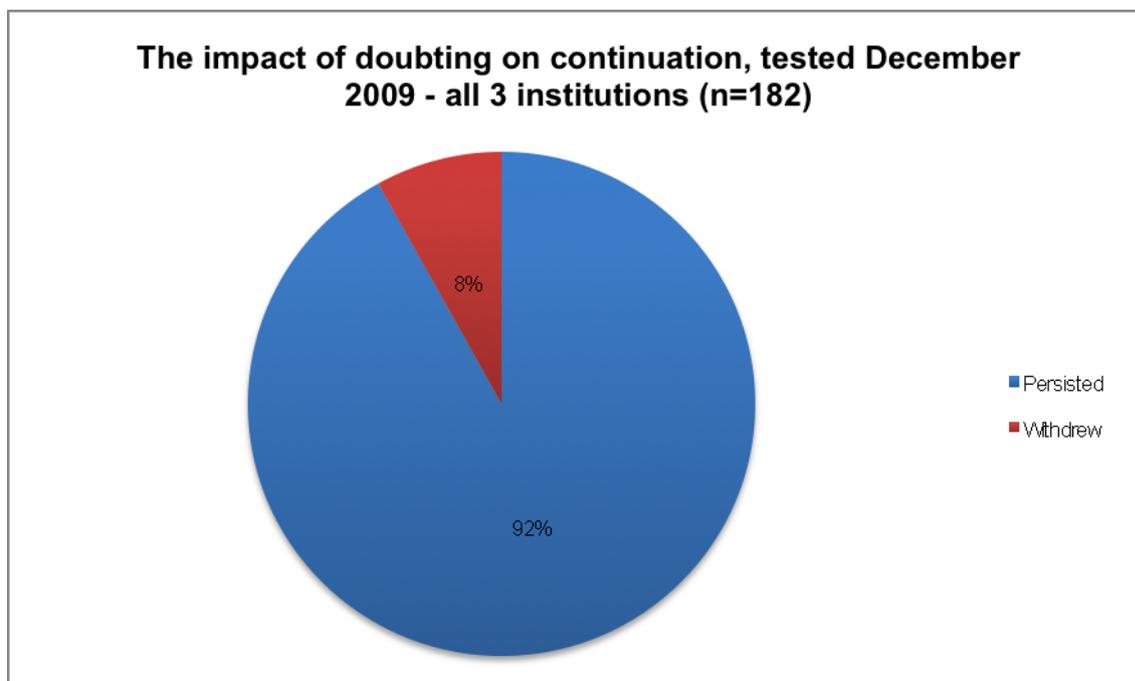
Continuation of non-doubters

In contrast, 296 of the 301 non-doubting students did so (98%).

Figure 10 - The impact of non-doubting on continuation, tested December 2009 – all 3 institutions (n=301)
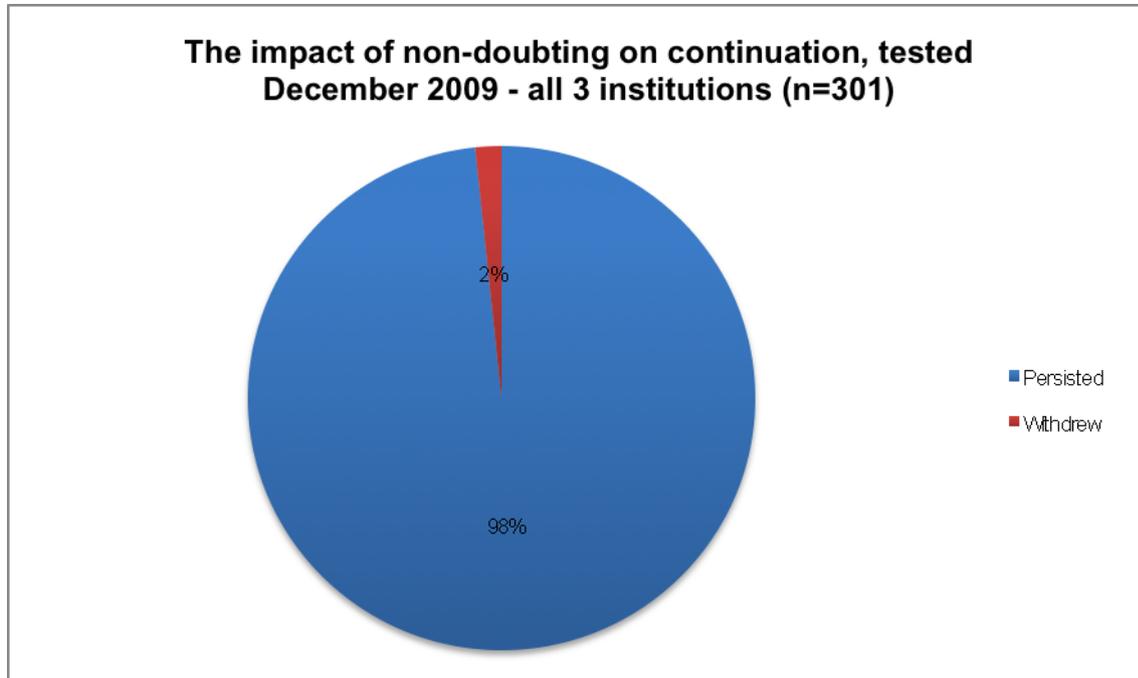
Therefore, the group most at risk of early withdrawal are those students with doubts. As we shall discuss later in this report, doubters are less satisfied with their university experience and appear to be less engaged with their peers and their institution. The reasons for doubting are similar to those cited in research studies conducted with students after they have withdrawn. It therefore appears that doubting is a factor in leaving early: either directly because the doubts cause students to withdraw, or indirectly because doubters feel less committed to their course of action and are less able to robustly resist problems when they arise. This appears to concur with Ozga & Sukhnandan's (1998) post-withdrawal research which suggests that most early withdrawal does not take place due to a sudden crisis out of the blue, but because students were already facing problems with their university experience.

In the 2009 student transition survey, BU students were most likely to have doubts (45% were doubters) and had the lowest rate of continuation. UoB students were the least likely to have doubts (29%) and the highest overall rate of continuation. At all

three institutions, doubting increased the risk of withdrawing early (see 14b for further details).

There were a small number of non-doubting students who withdrew. Of the four non-doubters who withdrew at NTU, all were 19 or older, 2 were aged 46+, 3 were female, and 3 lived locally in their own homes. They all reported a positive university experience. Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998) suggest that those students who do withdraw due to a sudden crisis are more likely to be mature students facing crises outside the course. Although the sample sizes of these groups in our study are small, they appear to correlate with their model. Doubting is therefore an important factor when considering continuation, but as not all leavers are also doubters, clearly it is not the only one.

Finding c) Doubters reported a poorer quality experience than students who have not doubted.

Overall, it appears that the 2/3 of students who were non-doubters were more likely to be engaged (Bryson, Cooper & Hardy, 2010) with the experience at university than their doubting peers. They appeared to have a better understanding of the university processes and were more likely to report a positive relationship with staff and students. The 1/3 of students who had considered leaving early reported a lower level of satisfaction with their university experience.

In the 2009 transition survey, all students were asked to report on 17 Student Experience Factors, for example *"I have enthusiastic lecturers"* or *"I have an enjoyable social life"*. They were asked to report on both the importance and their experience of each factor using a Likert scale of 1- 5 (1= very negative, 5 = very positive).

The 17 Student Experience Factors were:

1. My subject is interesting
2. My course is well organised
3. I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course
4. My taught sessions (such as lectures and seminars) are interesting
5. Lecturers are accessible
6. I feel valued by teaching staff
7. The assessment on my course is what I expected it to be
8. The feedback I receive about my work is useful
9. I feel confident that I can cope with my studies
10. My fellow students are supportive
11. My family is supportive
12. I have easy access to University resources (e.g. Computers, library books that I need)
13. I would know where to go within the University if I had a problem
14. I like the house/ flat/ halls that I am living in
15. I have an enjoyable social life
16. I am confident that I will have enough money to cope
17. Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals

The single Student Experience Factor with the strongest association to doubting at NTU in 2009 was 'I feel confident that I can cope with my studies'; if a student reported that they did not feel confident they were more likely to be a doubter when compared to any other factor. See 14c for further details.

Overall, doubters rated their experiences more negatively than non-doubters. If we compare the averages, then non-doubters report a 12% difference between the importance of a factor and their actual experience of it, whereas doubters report a 29% difference (see figure 11 below).

In the 2011 student transition survey, we tested the seriousness of students doubting and it is interesting to note that students with stronger doubts (4 or 5 out of 5) reported a poorer quality experience than doubters with less serious doubts (1-2 out of 5). It is worth noting that doubters who subsequently withdrew reported the poorest quality experience of all.

Figure 11 - Student Transition Survey (2009) -The average difference between the importance and experience of the 17 Student Experience Factors at all 3 institutions (n=873)
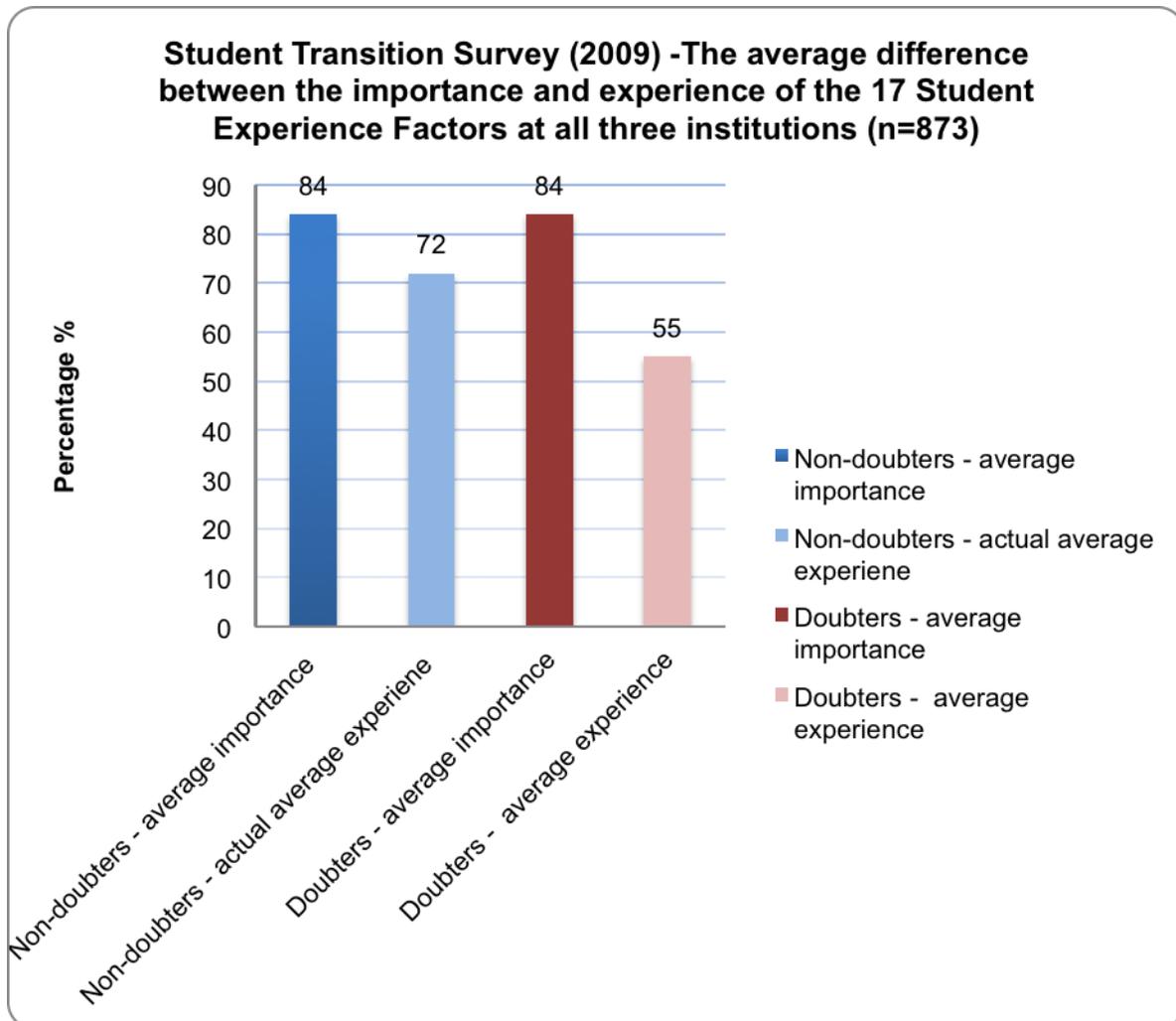
Although in most circumstances students rated the importance of a Student Experience Factor more highly than their experience of it, there were some exceptions. For example, in the 2009 transition survey, doubters at Bournemouth University rated the experience of having a 'supportive family', an 'enjoyable social life', and 'supportive fellow students' higher than the importance of each factor. Whilst it may be tempting to suggest that these students are out partying and not studying, it may also be that in our studies students appear to undervalue the importance of these factors. In 2011, we sought further details about what kind of a social activity students were engaged with. Although the social activities of both

doubters and non-doubters were largely similar, BU doubters were less likely to participate in clubs and societies or community activities and volunteering; they were more likely to socialise in nightclubs or play computer games.

In our initial proposal, we set out to identify differences between doubters who continued and doubters who withdrew. Whilst individual responses varied, the overall pattern was that doubters who withdrew had lower levels of satisfaction, not that they were dissatisfied in different areas to doubters who remained.

See 14c for more-detailed information about the differences between doubters and non-doubters in the 2009 and 2011 surveys at each institution.

In 2009, a factor analysis was conducted on the 17 Student Experience Factors at NTU (the largest dataset) and they were separated into three sets of variables.

> a. Academic Experience Variables
> b. Support, Resources and Future Goals
> c. Student Lifestyle

A regression analysis was then used to look at whether these new variables: 'Academic Experience', 'Support, Resources and Future Goals' and 'Student Lifestyle' could indicate whether a student was more likely to have doubts about being at university. A number of other variables were also included in the regression analysis: age, gender, whether the respondent was the first person in the immediate family to go to university, whether NTU was their first choice of university, whether this was their first time living independently and whether they had applied though clearing. The variable with the most impact on doubting and persistence was 'Academic Experience'. If a student rated these factors lowly they were more likely to be a doubter and if they rated them very lowly, they were more likely to be a doubter who left. See 13e for further information about academic doubts. See Appendix 4 for further details of this analysis.

In addition to the 17 Student Experience Factors, we asked students to report on a number of processes:

- Did they find the information about the course prior to coming to university accurate?
- Had anyone explained the difference between learning and teaching at University and their prior studies?
- Did they understand what those differences are?

We also wanted to know:

- Whether or not they found their studies enjoyable
- How hard they were working
- What grades were they aiming for by the end of the first year and at graduation?

As with the Student Experience Factors, student doubters tended to report a more negative experience than their non-doubting peers.

The small numbers of students who didn't find the information about their course accurate were far more likely to be doubters. At NTU only 36 of 656 respondents to the 2009 transition survey perceived the information about their course to be inaccurate, but 26 of them were doubters. Doubters were also less likely to report that someone had explained the difference between learning at university and their previous places of education. At NTU, 46% of doubters stated that someone had explained the difference between school/ college and university to them, whereas 55% of non-doubters felt this was the case. Furthermore, if a student did not feel that they understood what these differences were, they were far more likely to express doubts (62% of those who did not understand were doubters, only 35% or those who understood the differences felt the same way).

Doubters were also enjoying their course less. For example, of all the students at BU who were enjoying their course, just 32% had considered withdrawing. In contrast,

88% of those students who were not enjoying their course had considered withdrawing. At NTU, 26% of those enjoying the course were doubters, as were 85% of those who were not enjoying it.

Doubters also reported finding their course more difficult than their non-doubting peers.

Figure 12 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - UoB Perceived difficulty of studies
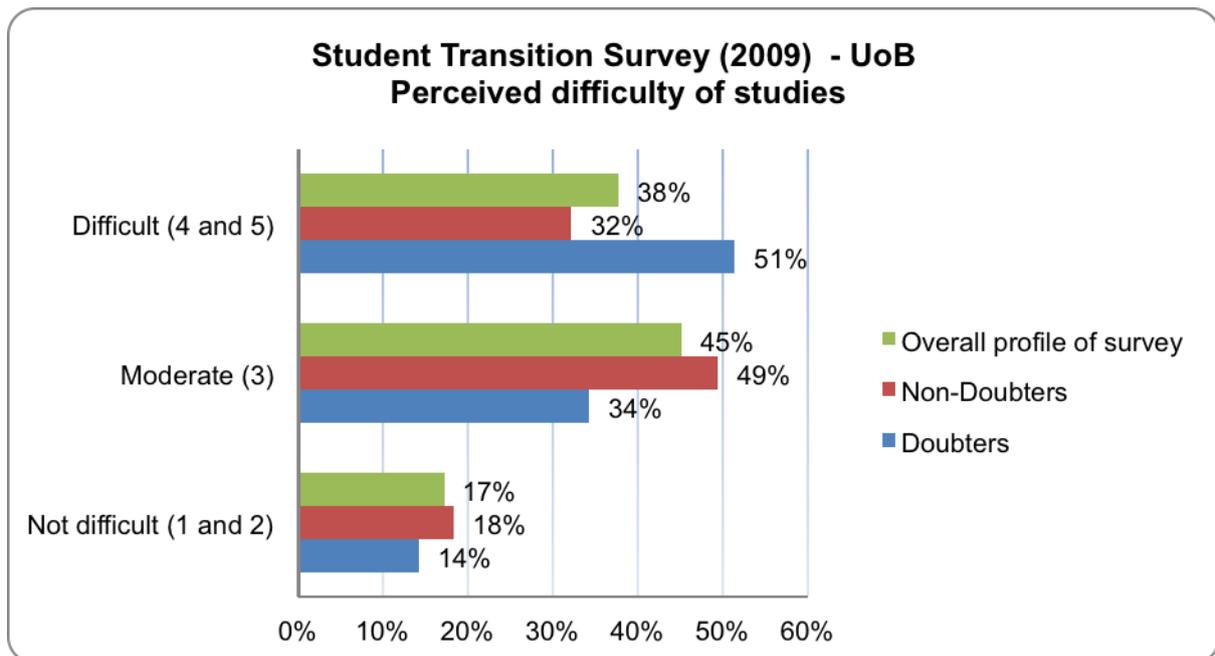
This appears to have impacted upon academic performance too. The team at Bradford monitored academic attainment amongst the sample and noted that student doubters were less likely to achieve 2:1 and 1st class grades than non-doubters.

Figure 13 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - UoB First year grades (n=63)
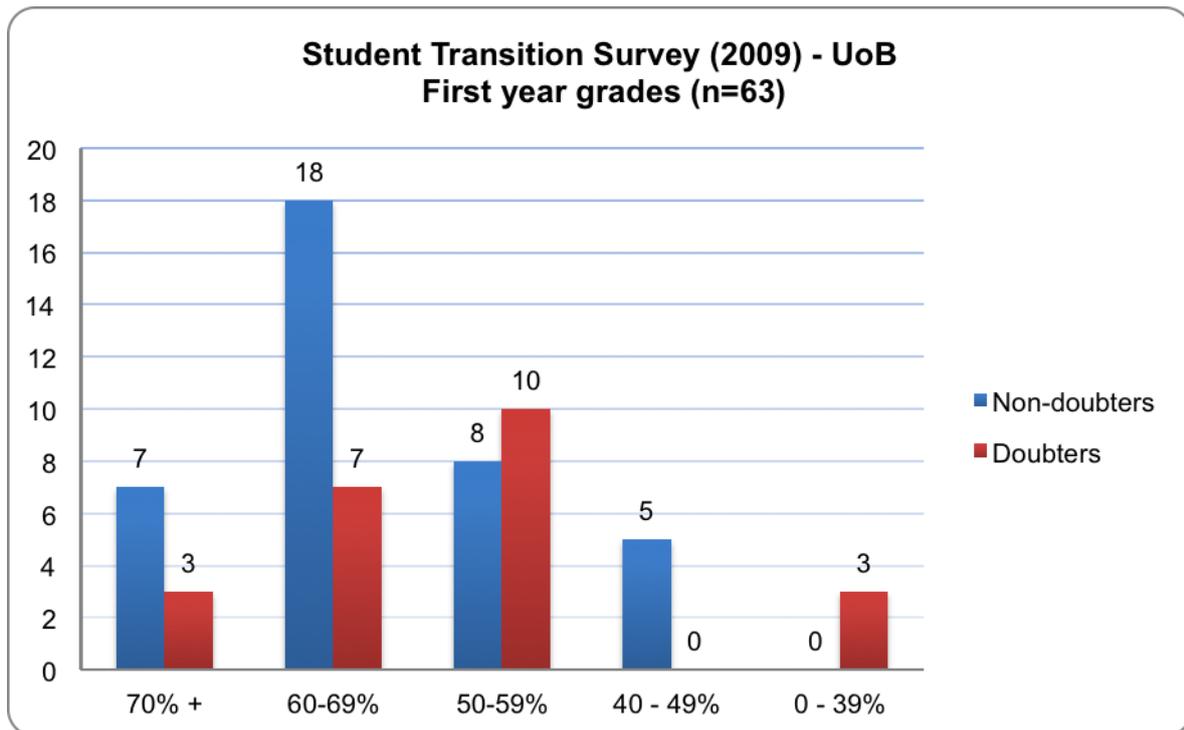
Student doubters were also less academically ambitious than their non-doubting peers. Somewhat ambitiously, across the three partners, an average of 50% of all respondents were aiming for a first class classification when they graduated. See the table below for the responses at the University of Bradford.

Figure 14 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - UoB Students own perceptions of the grades they will achieve at graduation (n=128)
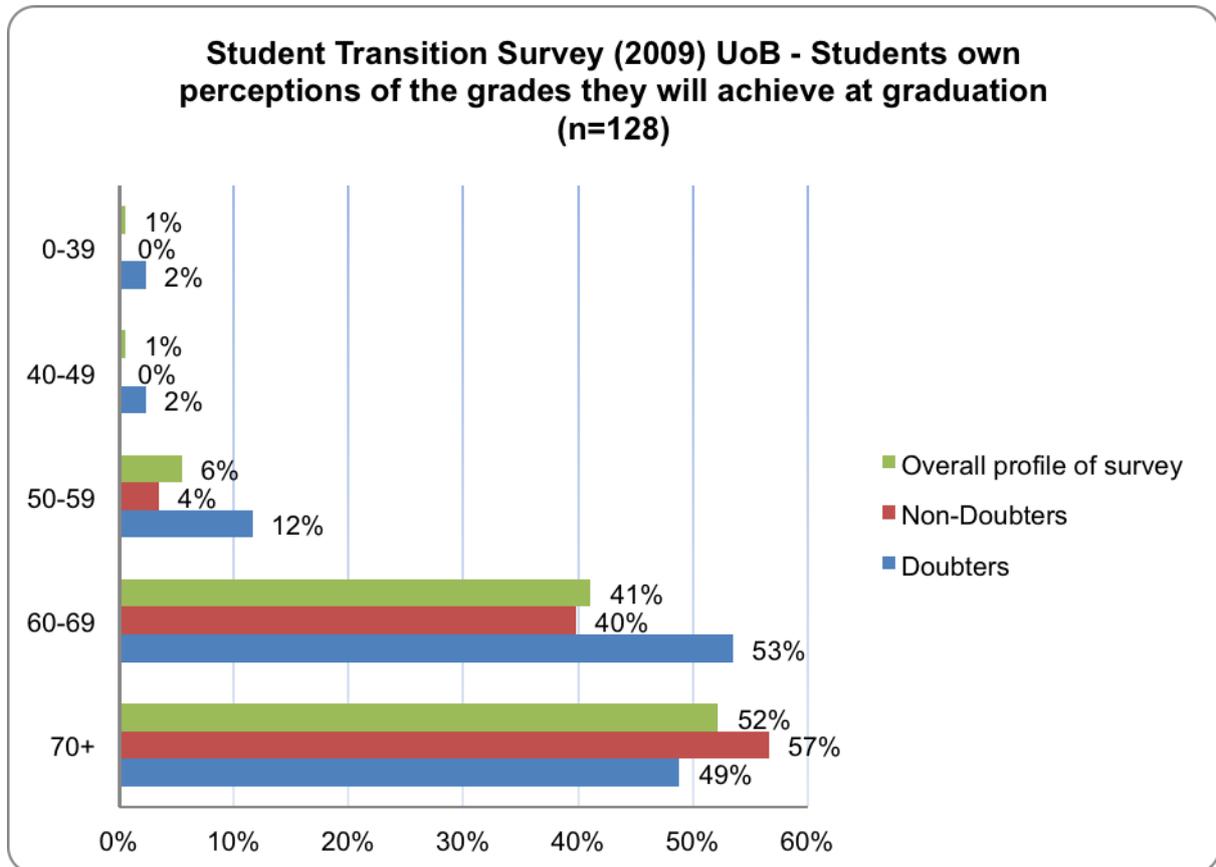
In 2011, we asked students if they had struggled with aspects of their course, at NTU in particular the difference was striking; doubters were far more likely to have struggled with aspects of their course compared to non-doubters).

Figure 15 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU Have you struggled with any aspects of your course so far? (n=452)

Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU
Have you struggled with any apsects of your course so far? (n=452)

Doubters: No 20%, Yes 80%
Non doubters: No 48%, Yes 52%
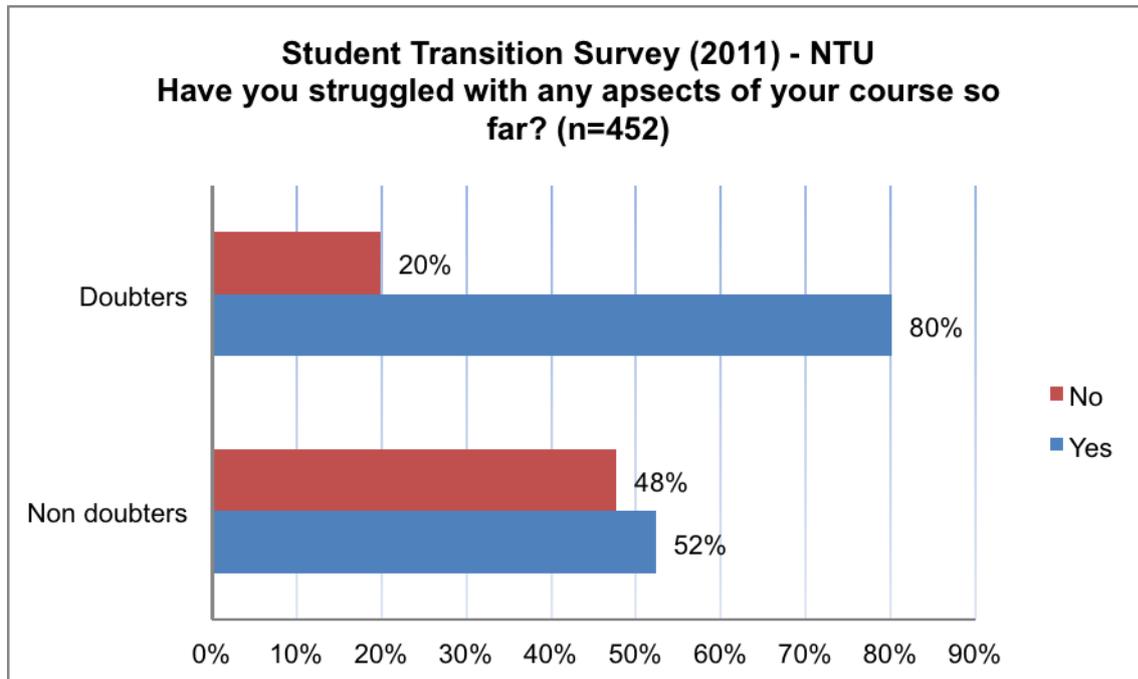
In the 2011 survey, 85% of non-doubters reported feeling confident about asking for support from their tutors if they faced an academic problem, whereas only 75% of doubters felt the same way. Despite this, it is perhaps reassuring that doubters were actually more likely to have asked staff for help. We suspect that this reflects the difference between the two group's levels of self-confidence. As non-doubters appear generally more confident that they can cope, they may have worked through the problems themselves. Doubters may have needed the additional reassurance offered by academic staff. Students were invited to explain whom they had spoken to. Of those who answered, 168 spoke to a member of academic staff, primarily a tutor on the programme, 39 spoke to friends or course mates, 11 to family, 11 to central student support services, 6 to administrative staff and 1 to a course representative.

Figure 16 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU Have you spoken to anyone about it? (n=372)
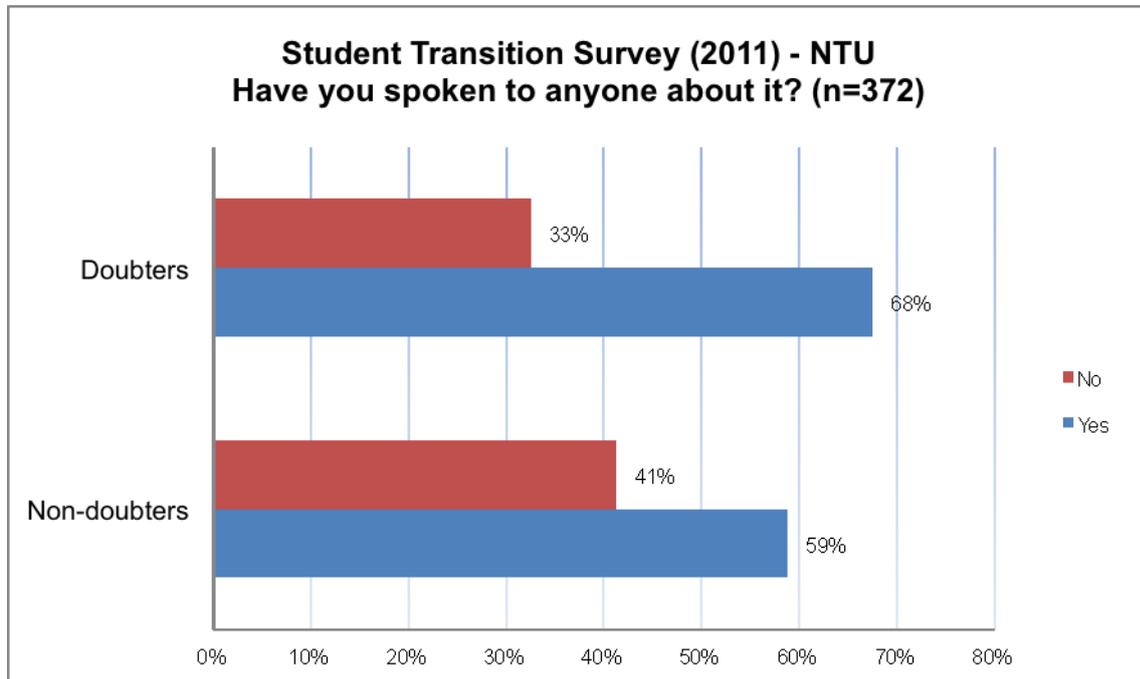
It is interesting that not all of these students received additional support. We suspect this reflects the fact that often students will have been reassured by speaking to someone, particularly a tutor, and will not have needed additional advice and support. We will explore students' academic support needs further in subsequent research.

Figure 17 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU Have you received any additional support or help? (n=170)

Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU
Have you received any support or additional help? (n=170)

Doubters
No — 59%
Yes — 41%

Non-doubters
No — 60%
Yes — 40%
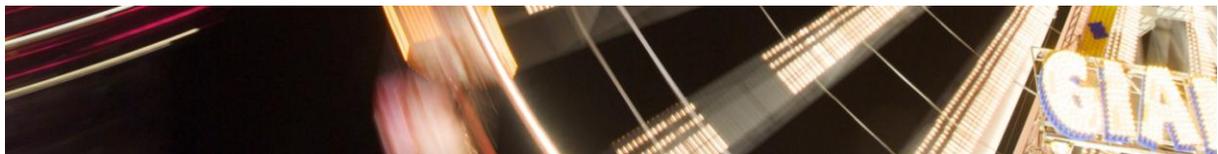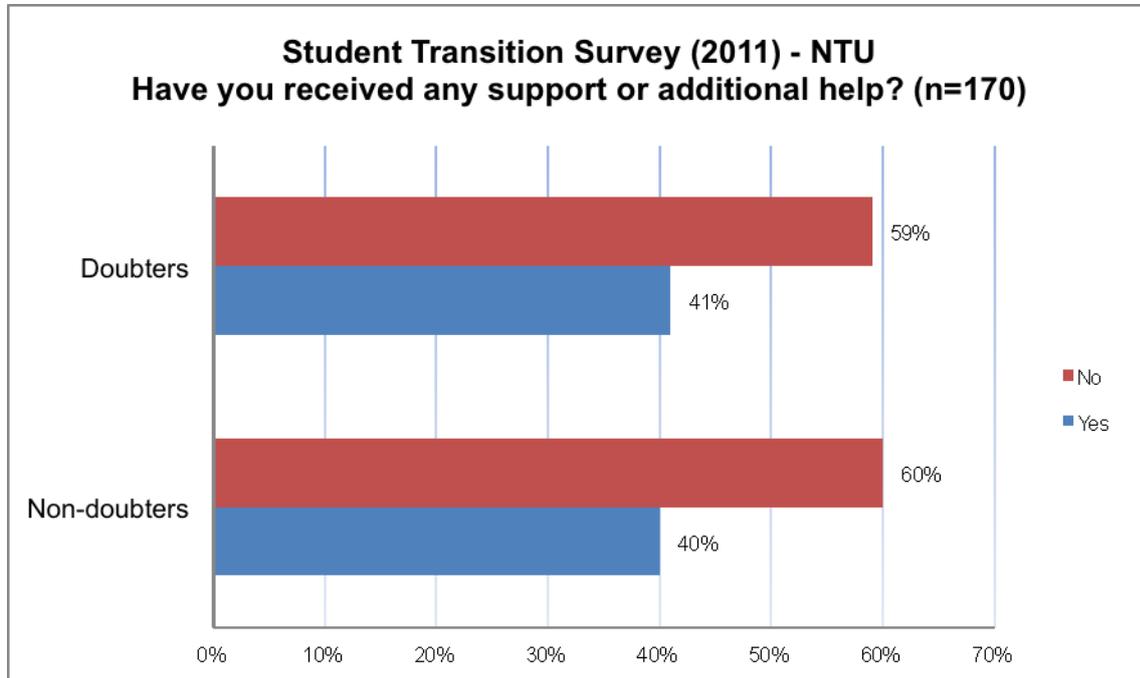
Finding d) Students usually report more than one reason for doubting.

The pattern of doubting appears to be that students do not have a problem simply with a single issue. Instead, doubting appears to be more complex, with doubters often reporting more than one reason to doubt. For example, in the 2009 survey, where respondents were asked the open question 'please tell us what made you consider leaving', their reasons for doubting included: course relate reasons, reasons to do with finance and the student lifestyle, homesickness and doubts about future goals (for more detail see section 13e).

In the 2011 survey, the 280 student doubters from all three partners provided us with 685 reasons for doubting (2.1 per respondent).

See 14d for further information

Finding e) The primary reasons for doubting are associated with student perceptions of the course.

Whilst respondents did cite other factors, the most frequently cited reasons in both 2009 and 2011 for considering withdrawal related to the course. This ought to be expected given that the overall reason for being at university in the first place is the course. It appears to usefully reinforce previous studies conducted with students who have withdrawn from university, for example Yorke & Longden (2008) show that amongst a large study of withdrawn students, academic factors are the most frequently mentioned as a reason to withdraw.

In 2009, we asked students to identify what their priorities were. We asked them to report how focussed they were on six factors (seven at BU[11]). As might be expected, their primary focus was on their studies. In this context, it appears entirely appropriate that reasons for doubting are primarily focused on the course.

[11] At BU, the researchers also asked students about Peer Assisted Learning.

Figure 18 - Student Transition Survey (2009) – all institutions Focus of interest (4 – 5 out of 5) (n=873)
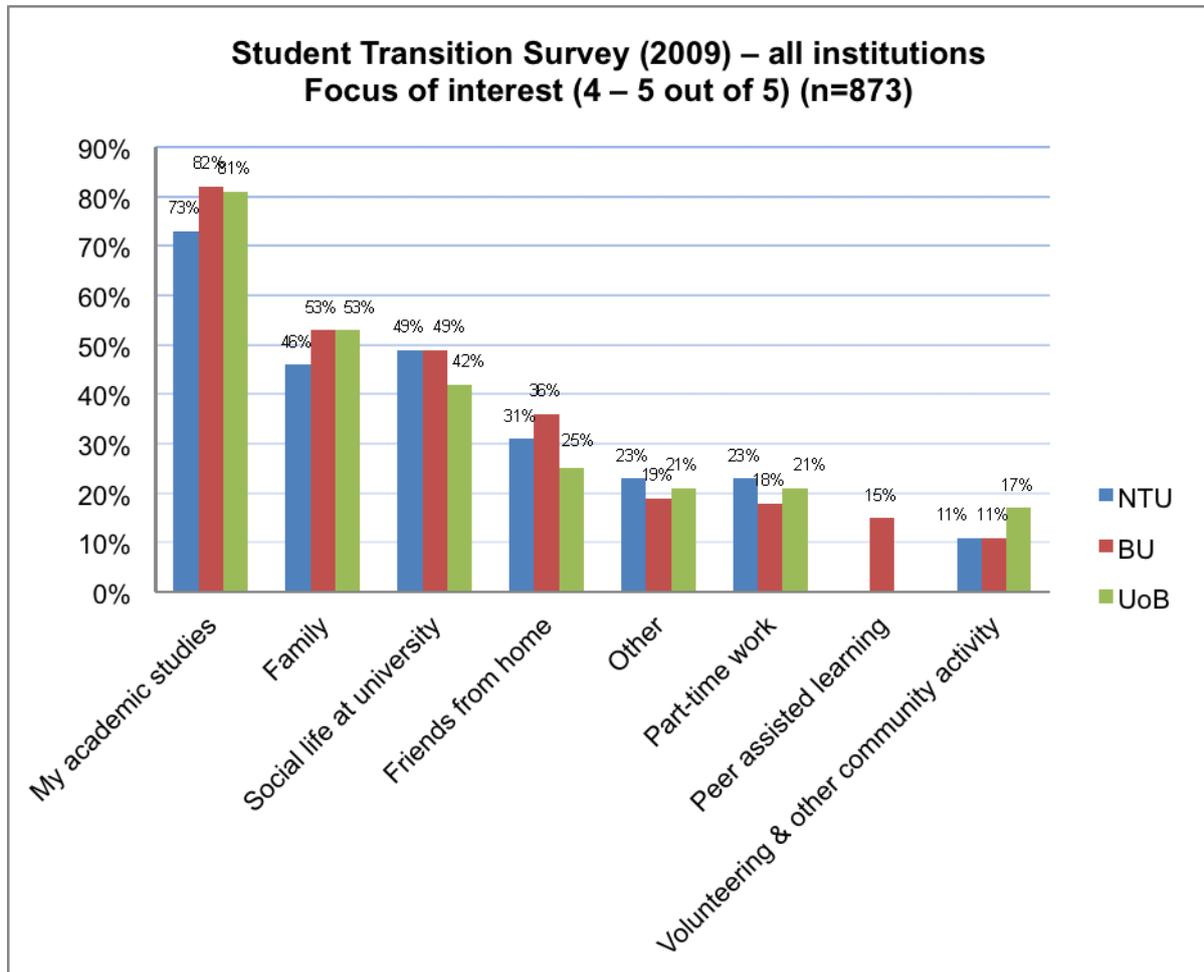
Figure 19 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - all institutions reasons for doubting by percentage (n=365 reasons cited by 320 doubters)
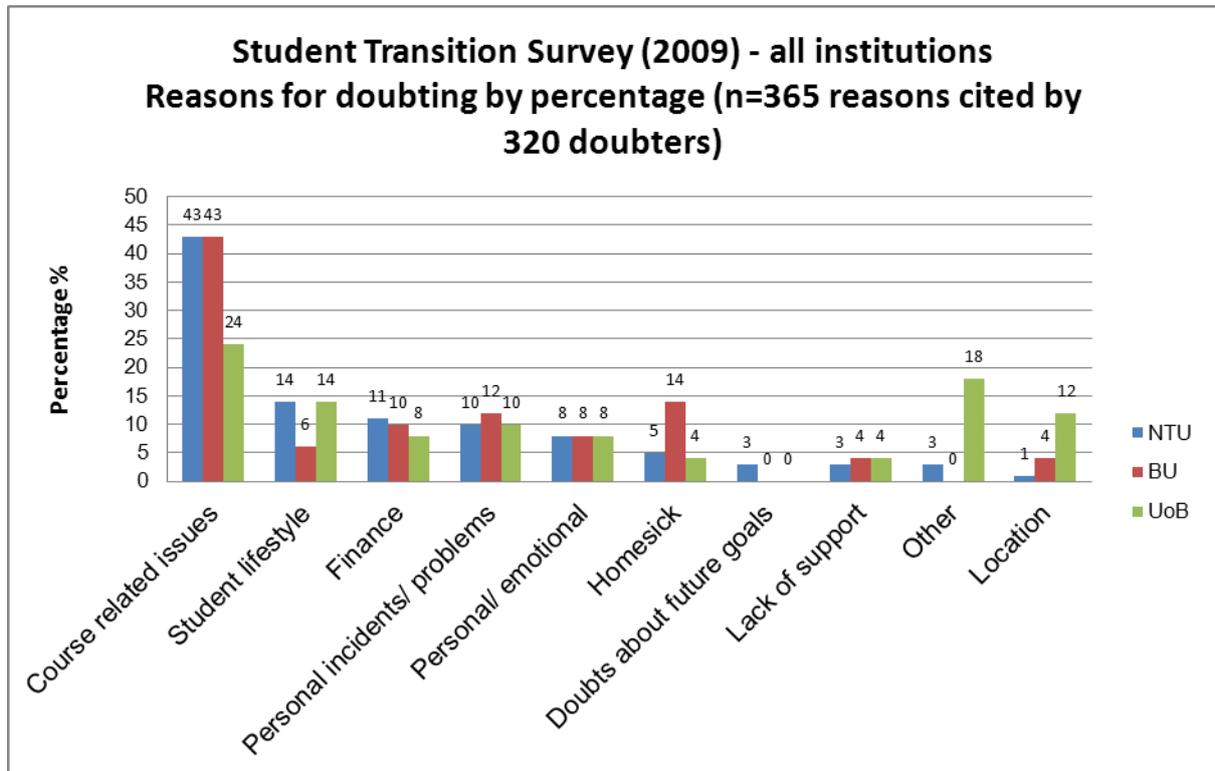
The responses in the category 'course-related factors' in the 2009 student transition survey were analysed further. Students cited 'anxiety about coping' 45 times out of the 137 course-related responses. The next most frequently named reasons were 'course not as expected' and 'dissatisfaction with staff members'. When the continuation of NTU students was tested in December 2009, the Student Experience Factor most closely associated with doubting was 'I feel confident that I can cope with my studies.' If a student reported lowly in this factor, they were highly likely to be a doubter. We then sought to identify which factors had a relationship to confidence.

The 17 Student Experience Factors[12] were analysed to see if any of them had a association with confidence. Confidence was most closely related to the variables '*the feedback I receive about my work is useful*' and '*the assessment on my course is what I expected it to be*'. Therefore if a student perceived their feedback to be

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[12] The HERE Project interim report (2009-10) tested the following five factors: Lecturers are accessible', 'The feedback I receive about my work is useful', 'I would know where to go within the university if I had a problem', 'My fellow students are supportive', 'Do you have a personal tutor?'. For this report, all 17 Student Experience Factors were tested.

useful, or felt that their assessment was as they expected it to be, they were more likely to feel confident that they could cope with their studies. The factor with the third strongest correlation to confidence was '*I feel valued by teaching staff*' followed by '*my subject is interesting*' (see appendix for further details).

Figure 20 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - all institutions - Further analysis of academic reasons for doubting – percentages (n=183 academic reasons cited)

Student Transition Survey (2009) - all institutions – Further analysis of academic reasons for doubting – percentages (n=183 academic reasons cited)
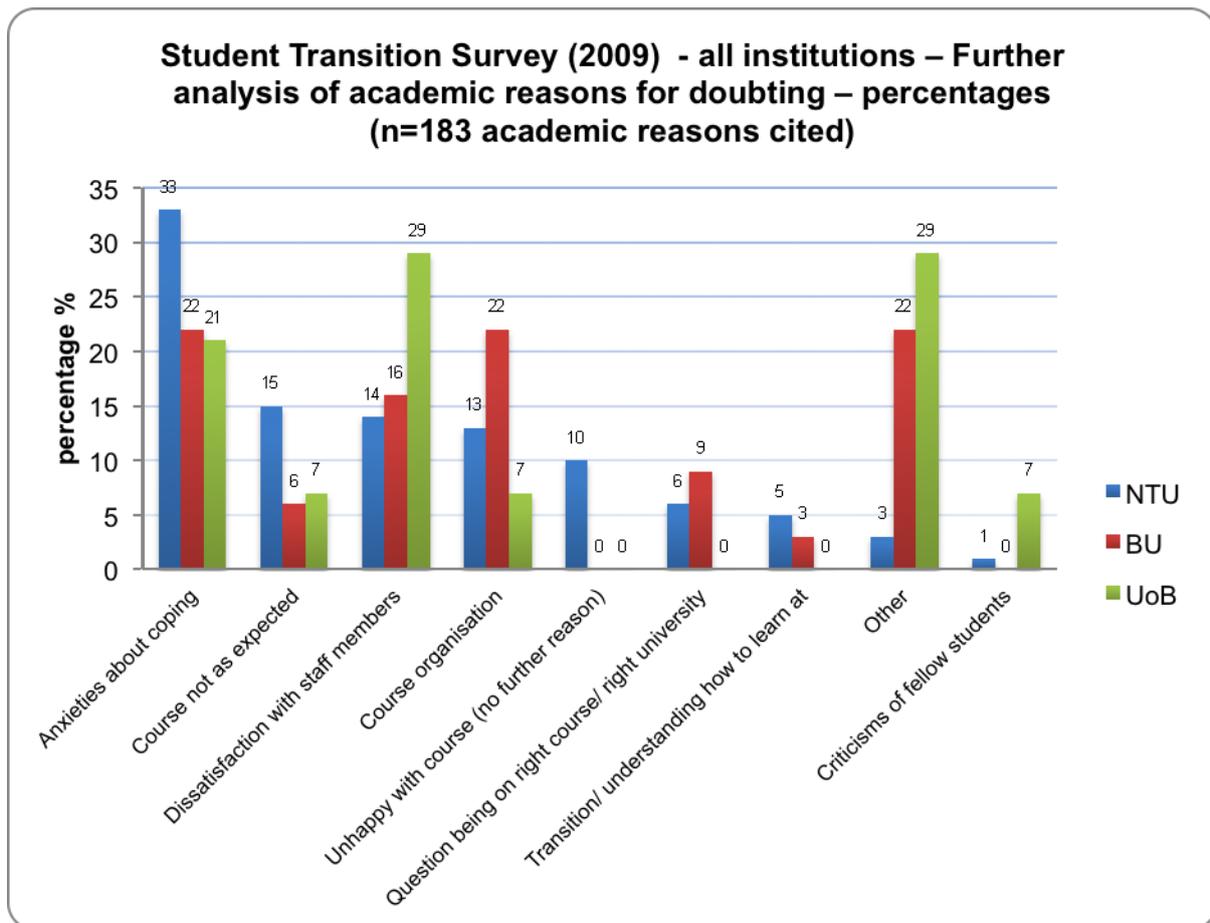
We do not argue that this means that doubting is simply a reflection of unsatisfactory teaching. In our surveys from 2009 and 2011 there are respondents from the same courses who are both non-doubters and report a highly positive experience and doubters who report a negative one. This appears to be much more about the problems that some students have coping with the transition from learning, teaching, assessment and pastoral support offered in post-16 education when compared to that offered in higher education. As Castles (2004) argues, student retention is not just about the experience, but the way that the student responds to the experience. It does however appear that programmes do need to more clearly articulate ways for all students to understand and engage with the style of learning, teaching and assessment on offer at university.

Other important reasons to doubt were:

- 'Student lifestyle and accommodation'
- 'Doubts about the future benefits of the course'
- 'Finance'

Figure 21 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - all institutions Reasons for doubting (n=472 responses from 339 doubters)

Student Transition Survey (2011) - all institutions
Reasons for doubting (n=472 responses from 339 doubters)

Reason	UoB	BU	NTU
Problem associated with my course	31%	42%	21%
Other	0%	6%	19%
Student lifestyle (social life, problems with other students etc)	15%	15%	16%
Doubted whether this course would help my future goals	21%	14%	14%
Personal problems (home life etc)	14%	10%	12%
Homesick	6%	8%	9%
Finance	14%	6%	8%
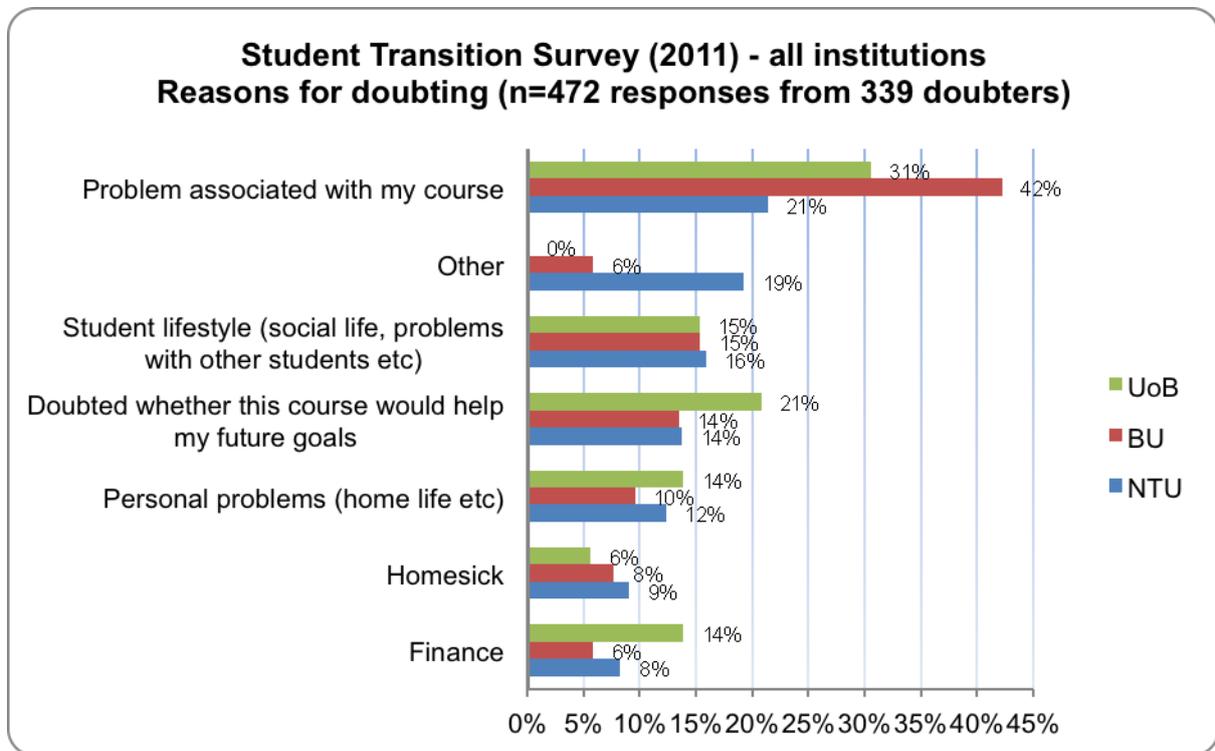
Finding f) There were four main reasons cited by doubters for staying.

In 2009, the four main reasons cited by students for remaining at university were:

- 'Support from friends and family'
- 'Adapting to course/ university'
- 'Determination/ internal factors'
- 'Future goals/ employment'

Figure 22 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - all institutions - reasons cited by doubters for staying (n=444)
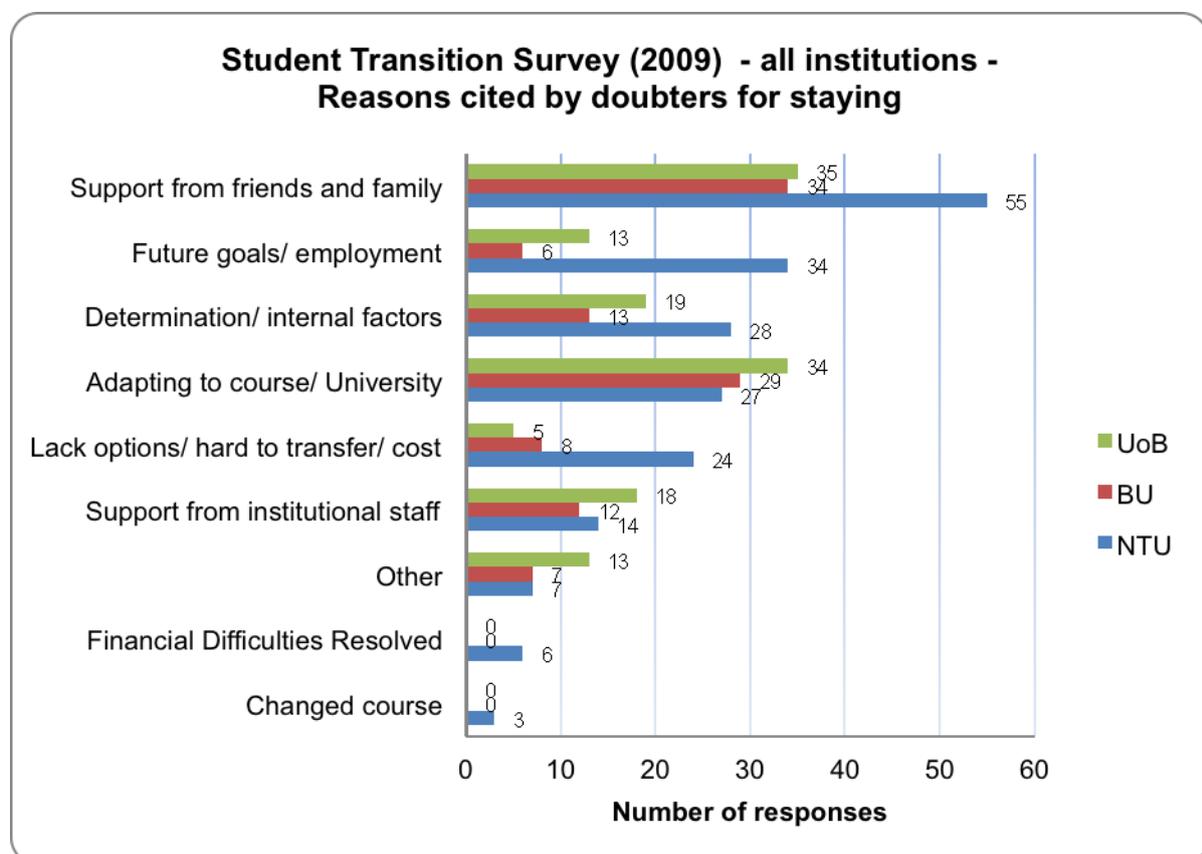
It is important to note that the reasons to stay are not simply the polar opposites of the reasons to doubt.

We chose to group support from friends and family together as it provided an indication of the support offered to students through personal support networks, rather than by paid professionals such as tutors or student support staff. At NTU, the most important subgroup within this category was 'friends made at university'. By

way of contrast, support from academic and student support staff was much less frequently mentioned, although interviews with individual student doubters had shown that such support was often extremely important. In 2011, instead of providing an open question, the student transition survey asked students to indicate which of a range of 14 factors they felt helped them to stay (see appendix 2). Students were asked to tick all those that applied and also to rate the most important factor to them. In all three institutions, when taken together, the three factors 'friends made at university', 'family' and 'friends from home' were together the most frequently cited reasons to stay. However, when asked to select only the most important reason to stay, support from friends and family was mentioned less frequently .It appears that students do not recognise the value of these informal forms of support despite their apparent importance.

Figure 23 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - all 3 institutions Most important reason to stay – shown as a percentage of the responses (n=155)

Student Transition Survey (2011) - all three institutions
Most important reason to stay – shown as a percentage of the responses (n=155)
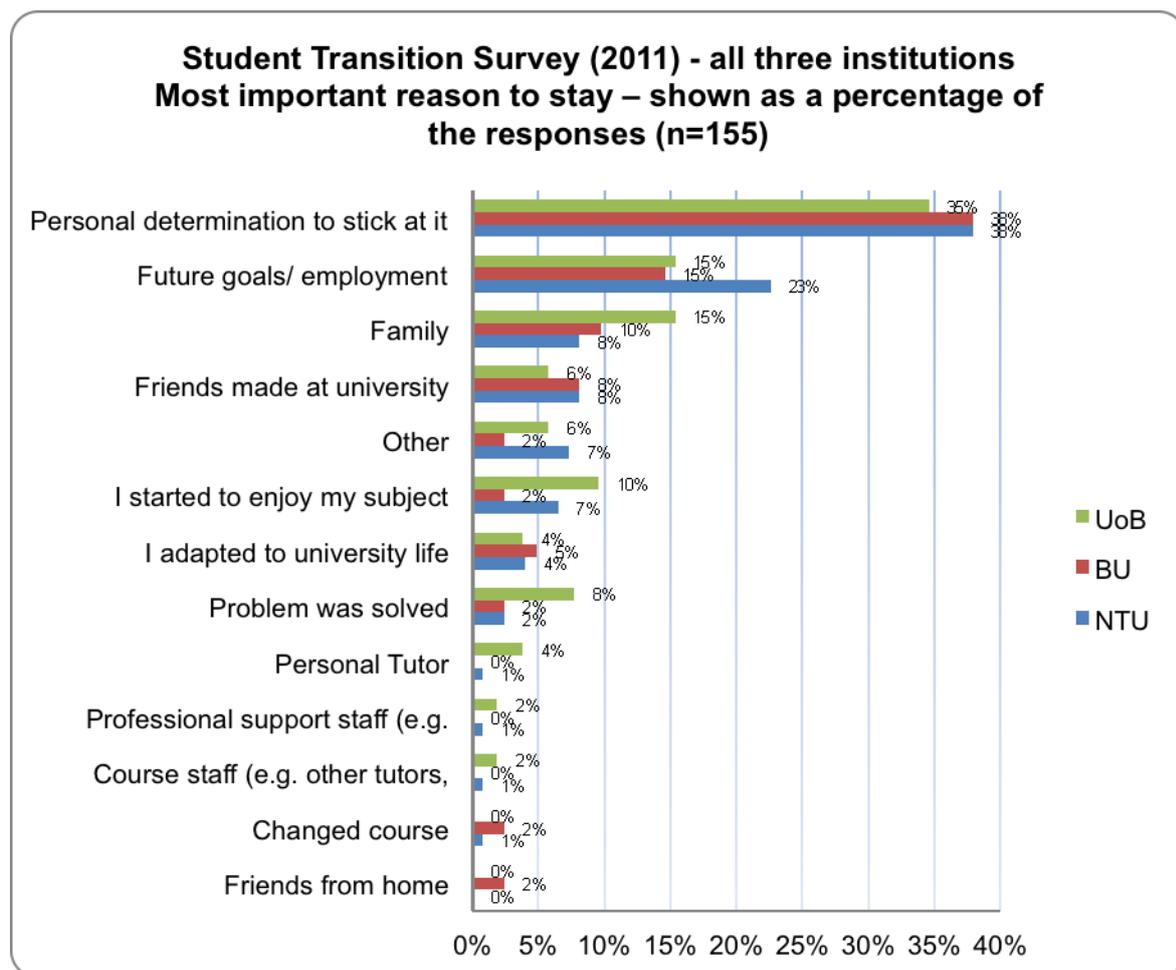
In the 2011 survey, 'determination & internal factors'[13] moved from being the third to the most important reason to stay. This may be due to the way that the question was asked and reflects the fact that most individuals are likely to want to have a positive regard of their actions and motivation.

If the most commonly cited reasons for doubting related to the course, we would expect 'adapting to life at university' to be a frequently cited reason to stay. It featured strongly in the 2009 and 2011 surveys.

'Future goals and employment' were also frequently cited as reasons to stay. When we asked NTU students what was interesting to them about their subject, the applicability of the course to future goals featured as the third most frequently cited reason.

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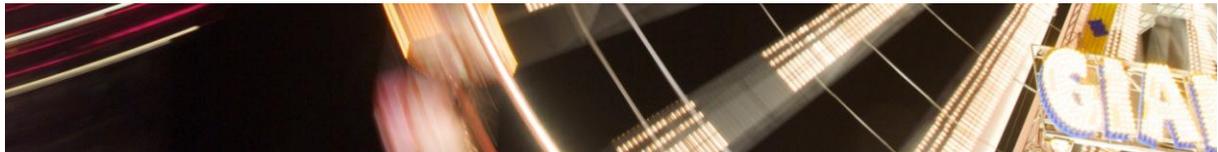
[13] Renamed in 2011 to 'personal determination to stick at it' as this is how it was phrased in the 2011 questionnaire.

Finding g) The primary times for considering leaving are immediately before and after Christmas.

As these are the times when most first years encounter their first set of coursework deadlines and feedback, this appears to support the evidence that the primary reasons for doubting are academic related.

Fewer than 5% of our respondents indicated that they had considered withdrawing prior to starting university. It may be that students with strong early doubts had already withdrawn or not answered our survey, but in our study, it appears that doubting pre-arrival was not a major factor.

The relative importance of different reasons for doubting changed over time. As a general pattern, problems associated with the student lifestyle and homesickness are mentioned more frequently earlier in the academic year. Course factors appear to rise over time. At NTU, students appear to be more anxious that the course will not help their future career goals early in the academic year, at Bournemouth the opposite was the case.

Figure 24 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - all institutions - Further analysis of academic reasons for doubting (n=339)

Student Transition Survey (2009) - all institutions
Further analysis of academic reasons for doubting (n=339)
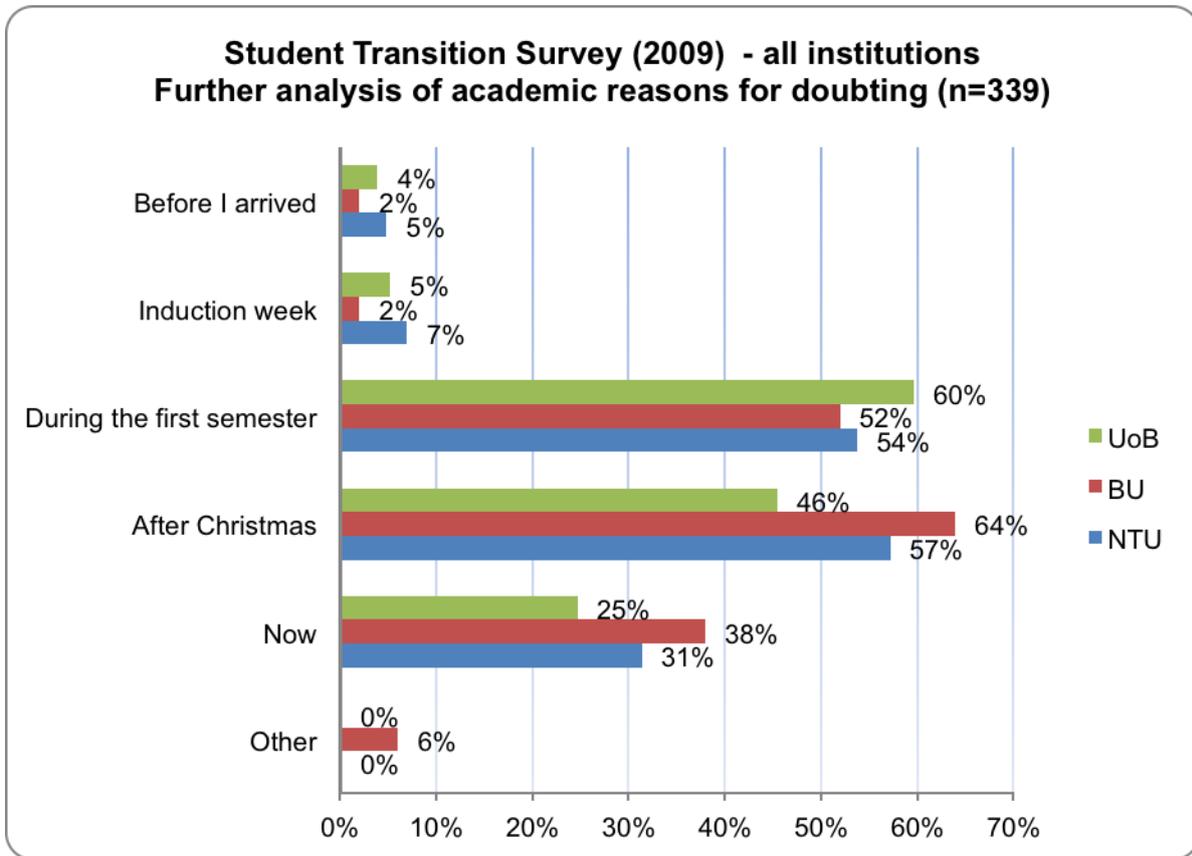
Finding h) Students reported different degrees of doubting

In 2009, the student transition survey asked student doubters to report on their intentions. They were provided with three options:

- I have doubted and decided to leave
- I have doubted and have made up my mind to stay
- I have doubted and have not yet made my mind up about what to do

When continuation was tested, the intention appeared to influence behaviour. For example, at NTU, half of all those who had 'decided to leave' actually did so. Amongst those doubters who had 'decided to stay', 95% persisted (a rate only 3% lower than those who had never doubted in the first place). Amongst students who had 'not yet made up their minds', 84% progressed. This appears to suggest that virtually all students can be supported to stay if the right measures are put in place.

Figure 25 - Analysis of impact of student intentions on continuation – all 3 institutions (n=483)
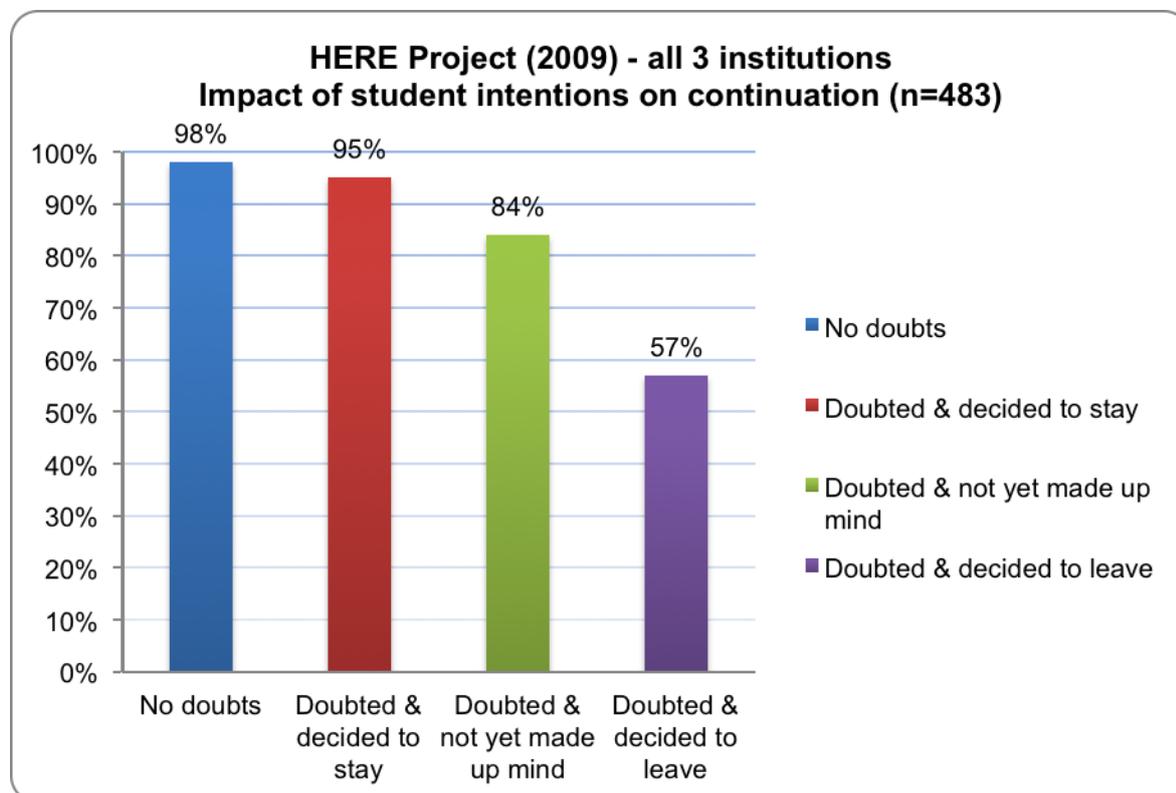
See 14h for further details

In the 2011 student transition survey, students who expressed more serious doubts appeared more uncertain about their future. For example, when Bradford students with the most serious doubts (5 on a scale of 1 – 5) were asked 'what had helped them remain', 42.4% stated that they had not yet made up their minds to stay. Only 28.4% of students with less serious doubts had not yet made up their minds to stay. The data will be monitored after the HERE Project has ended to see if it makes an impact on actual withdrawal.

Finding i) Some student groups appear more likely to doubt than others

As part of the research process we were keen to explore whether particular groups of students were more at risk of doubting and subsequent withdrawal. However our research methodology of large student surveys[14] and programme level interviews and surveys meant that data from students from different backgrounds was relatively limited. There were differences due to demographic background, however, the experience at the three partners were slightly different and so clear patterns do not always emerge.

Part-time students and students with disabilities[15] were more likely to have doubts. Part-time students within our NTU 2009 sample that gave us permission to monitor their progress were also more likely to withdraw[16]. The numbers of students within this group was very small, so the findings need to be treated with caution, but this does suggest that this is an area worthy of further exploration.

Female students were more likely to doubt, and those female students within our NTU 2009 sample that allowed us to monitor their progress, were less likely to withdraw[17] than their male counterparts. Even though there were fewer of them, male doubters were much more likely to withdraw compared to their female counterparts. This appears to imply that whilst female students may be more prone to doubting, they appear to possess better coping mechanisms than their male counterparts (Foster & Lefever, 2011).

Students living in private halls and living independently for the first time were also more likely to have doubts.

No clear patterns emerged for students from different ethnic backgrounds or ages.

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[14] Students could choose whether to complete the survey or not.
[15] The students in the Student Transition Survey (2011) at NTU who had declared a disability were marginally less likely to have had doubts than those students who had not declared a disability. This was different to the other responses to the Student Transition Surveys 2009 and 2011 in which students with disabilities were more likely to have had doubts.
[16] See Appendix 8.
[17] See Appendix 8.

In the 2011 survey, we tested the impact of UCAS tariff. There is only a slight trend that as students' UCAS tariff increases they are less likely to be a doubter. However, a significant number of students did not answer the question or replied 'don't know'[18]. There are also exceptions, for example the group with the highest incidence of doubting at BU are students with over 301 UCAS points. At present, we cannot safely predict that doubting is an indication of lower entry qualifications. It may be that the perceived 'fit' between students and their course expectations is a more important factor and we will monitor the impact of this on retention after the end of the project.

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[18] 865 of the 1,173 respondents to the 2011 survey responded 'don't know' or opted not to answer the UCAS tariff question.

Key Recommendations

The overriding key finding from the HERE Project is that students **can** be supported to stay. In total, 874 students who considered withdrawing in one of the seven[19] different surveys we used, provided evidence about factors that had helped them to stay. We are also very clear that doubting itself is a risk factor that increases the likelihood of early withdrawal and have shown in the sections above clear evidence about the factors that cause students to doubt in the first place. We therefore strongly suggest that student retention and success can be improved by tackling those factors associated with doubting and supporting doubters.

The recommendations below draw from the second strand of our research that looked at the impact that programmes had on retention, asking in particular for examples and practice within the nine areas identified in the strand one research. It was found that different programmes addressed these themes in different ways according to the nature and size of their cohort and some examples are outlined below. It is therefore important that when considering how best to address these themes within programmes that the context of the programme is also considered.

The recommendations are primarily at programme level and are particularly focussed on the first year. They are grouped into two fields:

- Manage those factors that lead to doubting, and therefore leaving
- Support students to stay

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[19] Pilot Study 2008 (NTU only), Student Transition Survey 2009 and 2011 at all three institutions.

The nine factors are:

Manage those factors that lead to doubting, and therefore leaving	Support students to stay
1. Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university 2. Improve the communication and relationship with staff 3. Identify and respond to students at risk 4. Help students make more informed decisions about choosing the right course in the first place	5. Improve social integration 6. Improve a sense of belonging to the programme 7. Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can achieve their future goals 8. Encourage students' active engagement with the curriculum 9. Ensure that there is good communication and access to additional student support

Some of these factors, for example 'engagement', 'belonging' and 'social integration', are closely related. However, we believe that there are distinct points about each that mean there is value to keeping them separate.

Manage those factors associated with doubting, and therefore leaving

Student doubters are more at risk of leaving early. Doubters appear less likely to have made the transition to being an effective learner at university, and appear less able to negotiate the academic and support services offered by universities (13.e.). Therefore, helping doubters to make the transition that their non-doubting peers appear to have done ought to help improve retention and success.

Recommendation 1) Identify and respond to students at risk

In our study, some groups of students were more likely to doubt and/ or leave early (see section 13.i). These groups appear to be largely in line with previous studies into retention (for example, NAO 2007). Doubters report being more likely to struggle with their coursework, but feeling less confident to ask for help than non-doubters. If doubters are less able or confident to use the support mechanisms in place, then programmes ought to consider more actively intervening early when problems arise. We recognise that an important part of being at university is taking responsibility for one's own problems, but feel that a large number of first year students will need additional support to do so. We therefore suggest that any strategy for identifying and responding to students at risk uses more active interventions early in the first year and encourages students to increasingly seek help for themselves as the year progresses.

During the programme audit stage of the research, we noted that programme teams were often effective at identifying and responding to those students at risk of withdrawing early. Most of the HERE Project recommendations are about improving the student experience for *all* students, however, we recommend that programme teams should also ensure that they focus additional effort on students most at risk.

In 2011, as part of the HERE Project final dissemination we became involved in discussions with the JISC funded[20] Student Engagement Traffic Lighting (SETL) project as the two projects complement one other. SETL is looking at indicators of student engagement (such as attendance monitoring and assignment submission) to inform the identification and support of students at risk.

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[20] This project (at the University of Derby) is funded through the JISC Business and Community Engagement (BCE) funding stream. Further details about the project can be found at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/bce/relationshipmanagement2/trafficlighting.aspx.

- **Monitor and review institutional and programme level data as part of annual quality assurance processes**

We strongly recommend that, as part of annual programme quality assurance processes, programme teams prioritise reviewing institutional and programme level retention data to identify at risk students and plan strategies for improving retention.

Yorke (2006, p208) notes that "*Experience suggests that data gathered to fulfil quality assurance obligations are not always exploited optimally for the purposes of quality enhancement: in other words, the 'quality loop' is not always closed"*. Programmes at NTU use such data as part of the annual quality assurance process, however the centrally-provided data was not always provided in a manner that was easy for teaching staff to exploit. The University has since responded to these concerns and purchased a more user friendly customer relations management database to monitor and report on student persistence. It is expected that this will help programme staff to better utilise data on student retention.

The two NTU programmes audited were part of an academic school that had set up a data management group to begin to explore strategies for better utilising student data for a range of purposes including understanding aspects of student withdrawal.

Buglear (2009) reports that the process of withdrawal is often ambiguous, noting that there are often time differences between the last time a student uses the institutional computers and informs the university of the decision to withdraw. As a way of dealing with this problem, one of the NTU programmes surveyed kept additional information about those students considering and actually leaving early including whether or not they had transferred from another programme, were repeating the year or had work outstanding at the point that they withdrew. This was reviewed and used as part of the planning process. The programme team took a number of specific actions in response to this. They recognised, for example, that students taking re-sits were particularly at risk of early withdrawal and so wrote to students over the summer reminding them personally of exam dates and explaining to them

how to access support. They chose to communicate in writing, not email, as they were aware that not all of their students had easy access to computers at home.

- **Monitor 'at risk' times**

Fitzgibbon & Prior (2006) observed the key times that students withdrew throughout the year, with, where possible, reasons for that withdrawal. They produced a departure timeline and developed a year-long plan of interventions designed to support students at key pressure points. We note in finding 13.g that amongst the doubters who answered the student transition survey (March – May 2011) the key times when students were more likely to doubt were immediately before and after Christmas. The reasons for doubting also changed over time: student lifestyle anxieties were more prevalent early in the academic year.

- **Monitor engagement not just attendance**

One of the audited programmes at the University of Bradford piloted a comprehensive attendance policy. Its aim was *"picking people up who might have problems who wouldn't necessarily have come forward."* It was coordinated by a programme team member who reported that *"we keep a tight record of attendance … it's difficult for them to disappear … we are looking out for issues."* Students were aware of this policy and in the programme surveys some reported that they found it *'very useful, a motivator'*. Internal evaluation indicated an increased rate of retention (although this may also be due to a wider range of interventions the programme had implemented). The pilot was therefore felt to be successful and was expanded to other programmes within the school.

At Bournemouth University, one of the audited programmes formally reviewed the non-submission of coursework at the end of each term, rather than waiting for exam boards. Those students who had not submitted coursework were contacted by a member of staff and offered support.

- **Informal contacts between staff and students**

Students wanted tutors to notice when they were struggling and doubters spoke positively about situations when tutors had spotted there were problems. For example *"My lecturer for the previous module, she approached me at the end of one class when she thought I looked worried and concerned"* (BU student doubter comment). It appears that student doubters gain reassurance from the fact that they are known and this has a positive impact upon them. In recommendation 13.2 we note that feeling valued by staff was an important factor for boosting students' confidence about coping. Programme staff reported that regular informal contact was an effective way to identify students at risk. This was felt to be most effective when the programme team discussed students' interactions with the whole programme.

- **Respond to students at risk**

One of the NTU programmes surveyed used an early non-assessed diagnostic activity to identify students who may need further support. Where appropriate, students were encouraged to access a range of student support services, such as dyslexia support, a writing specialist and the programme's academic mentoring pilot scheme.

One faculty at the University of Bradford employ a Director of Studies/ First Year Tutor. The post holder has a cross-departmental pastoral and academic support role. The role is clearly communicated from the start of the year and students are strongly encouraged to use the services. The cross-programme nature of the role has two advantages. Students are often prepared to talk to the director about dissatisfaction on courses and this is fed confidentially back to programmes. They are also able to ease course transfers within the department.

Bournemouth University provide a 'Destinations Pack' for students considering transferring or withdrawing. This provides information for students in response to questions such as 'What if I have doubts?'

Recommendation 2) Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university

Course related problems are the most common reason for students to doubt (13e). Moreover, student doubters are less satisfied with many key aspects of the learning experience, they appear to understand their new environment less well, and appear to be adjusting to it less effectively than their non-doubting peers. Doubters were also more likely to report that they were not confident about coping.

In 2009, doubters were less likely to report working hard at their studies, for example, at UoB, 66% of non-doubters reported that they were working hard or very hard, whereas only 54% of doubters reported the same. In 2011, students were asked to report how important it was for them to work hard at their studies. At UoB, 75% of non-doubters reported that it was important or very important to them, whereas only 66.7% of doubters felt the same, perhaps revealing a very human disparity between intentions and actions. It may be that doubters are simply focussing on their social lives more, but in 2009, doubters claimed that their priorities were their studies. We would argue that at least part of the problem is that doubters have not understood how to engage with their studies.

We therefore recommend helping students to overcome these anxieties through the design and delivery of key elements of the first year learning experience.

In particular we suggest:

- **Better use of formative feedback**

At NTU (2009) the most important factors[21] associated with confidence about coping was whether or not students perceived feedback to be useful and whether the assessment was as they had expected it to be. For example, "*At the beginning of the course I was a bit overwhelmed by the amount of people who were clearly very smart and I found myself questioning my own academic abilities. After completing*

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[21] Further statistical analysis at NTU looked at whether there was a correlation between student responses to the statement 'I feel confident that I can cope with my studies' and their responses to the 17 Student Experience Factors. This analysis therefore looks at the link between confidence and these factors rather than doubting/persistence.

my first few assignments I convinced myself I hadn't done very well but I got good marks throughout the year as well as very detailed feedback so I was able to improve my work." (NTU student comment)

Doubters are less confident coping and also less likely to have understood the nature of learning and teaching at university. Therefore improving feedback is not simply about providing more feedback more quickly, but is also about helping students to learn how to use the feedback offered in the new environment. We recommend offering early diagnostic feedback to help students understand how they are coping and if needs be direct them to additional support from the tutors or specialists.

See Appendix 4 for further information.

- **Improve understanding about how HE is different from prior learning**

However, as doubters were also less likely to understand the difference between learning at university and their prior studies, they appear to feel less confident navigating the new environment. We strongly suggest explicitly teaching and engaging students in discussion about these differences, particularly over matters such as the nature of formative feedback in HE (Foster, McNeil & Lawther, 2011). For example, one of the NTU programmes sampled used an induction session to engage students in discussion about what these differences were and what that meant for students' own approaches to study.

- **Create an environment conducive to peer support**

In 2009, the most important reason cited by doubters at all three institutions for staying at university was support from friends and family. At NTU when 'support from family and friends' was further subdivided, 'friends made at university' was the most important single group. In the 2011 survey, at all three institutions, student doubters were also less likely to report that their course is friendly. We would suggest that programme teams build in small group activity to the curriculum, particularly in the first term, and ensure that ice breakers and other structured social activities are built

into the induction and early transition period (Cook & Rushton, 2008). BU has extensive Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) programmes, these were felt to help create a supportive environment in which students could ask for help. For example, one BU student commented: "*I understand the topics I have to do my coursework on and I know that if I don't, I can ask for guidance from my lecturers and PAL leader*" (BU non-doubter comment).

- **Consider differentiation within the cohort**

We note that students who were finding their work difficult, were less academically ambitious and had achieved lower grades, were more likely to have doubts. At NTU for example, in 2009, those who reported finding their studies very difficult were more likely to have doubts (74% of the group). Furthermore, it appears that there may be a link between academic failure and doubting. At NTU, five of the six students who withdrew due to academic failures were doubters. However, we also note that students who find that they are insufficiently challenged are marginally more likely to be doubters.

- **Improve students' understanding of assessment**

In 2009, 64.5% of non-doubters at UoB reported that assessment was as they expected it to be; only 34.4% of doubters felt the same way. Non-doubters therefore appear better able to understand the information disseminated by lecturers about the nature of higher education (and in particular ,assessment). At NTU (2009) it was also found that increased confidence was linked to whether assessment was as students expected it to be. As with the point about helping students to understand the difference between college and university, we recommend that these differences are much more explicitly discussed within the curriculum early in the first year.

Recommendation 3) Improve the communication and relationship with staff

It is tempting, given the prevalence of academic problems, to think that the solution is charismatic and inspiring lecturing. Clearly, we recommend that first year students should be taught by the faculty's best teachers, but our findings suggest that students want something slightly different. Students appear to want to have a relationship with an academic member of staff, to feel known. They appear to have come from an environment in college where they had a close personal relationship with a supportive tutor (Foster, Lawther & McNeil 2010) and appear to value an extension of that into the first year.

In 2009, when doubters were interviewed, they often reported on the importance of the staff role as a reason to stay. For example: *"This period of crisis where I didn't really know what to do and if I was managing with my studies, I guess getting that tutor support… that kind of broke some barriers that I had in my head"* (UoB doubter that stayed comment).

Doubters appear to feel more distant from teaching staff than their non-doubting peers. For example, in 2009, whilst 88.9% of UoB doubters thought that it was important to be valued by teaching staff; only 45.7% felt that they actually were. In contrast, 84.3% of non-doubters felt that it was important and 59.5% felt that they were valued. Some of the doubters in the interviews and focus groups found tutors difficult to contact. In contrast, non-doubters were much more likely to make positive statements about tutors. *"They strike a balance between being your friends and being your tutors and that makes them really easy to talk to"* (UoB student 2011).

Clearly some of the negative responses from doubters are due to the fact that some tutors are genuinely inaccessible. However it seems unlikely that doubters are simply unlucky in having hard to find tutors and must be due to the perceptions of the individual students, not simply their actual experience.

For example, doubters reported that they were less likely to know where to go for help. For example, 45% of doubters in the 2009 BU transition survey stated that they

would know where to go for help if they had a problem, whereas 70% of non-doubters felt the same. Doubters also reported feeling more distant from their academic tutors and fewer felt that a member of the course team would know them personally. In the 2011 BU transition survey, only 58.5% of doubters felt that they were known personally by at least one member of the course team, 75.0% of non-doubters felt the same way. In the same survey, when asked about being confident asking for help from a tutor, 62.3% of BU doubters stated that they were confident asking for help, whereas 85.7% non-doubters felt the same way.

It appears that for around 2/3 of students (the non-doubters) the mechanisms and support systems for accessing tutors are sufficient. However for the 1/3 of students who are doubters, programme teams need to re-think how they support and engage with students, the current systems appear to be leaving a high number of doubters feeling isolated.

- **Positive staff/ student relationships**

Interviews with doubters suggest that having an individual academic who is personally interested in them can make a profound difference to them and their confidence seeking help. For example: "*I see him quite often even if I just bump into him and he asks me if everything is going OK. If I've got any problems I always go and see him … so it's been good*" (NTU doubter that stayed). Analysis of NTU data (2009), found that, of the 17 Student Experience Factors, the factor with the third strongest association with increased confidence about coping with studies was '*I feel valued by teaching staff*[22].

It is clearly important to students that they feel that they are 'known' by an academic member of staff and have a relationship with them. Some doubters indicated that they wanted to be known to such an extent that if they did not attend, they would be spotted and responded to by staff.

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[22] See Appendix 4

Our recommendation is that the relationship with students is a professional one, with clearly defined boundaries. It is important to note though that students reported wanting to be known as individuals and responding positively to friendly staff. Staff interviewed in the programme audits felt that this was one aspect of their retention effort that worked well. "*We have a very strong culture of pastoral care for students – we always have had…we have a 'friendly face' culture, I think that is ingrained now*" (UoB staff comment).

We therefore recommend that students have a clear point of personal contact with academic staff during the first year. This does not need to be a personal tutor. Interviews with doubters suggest that the important issue is that students want an individual they will feel comfortable with. It appears that it is the quality of the relationships with staff members (personal tutor or otherwise) that is important. Staff, therefore need to be seen to be approachable, interested, accessible and responsive to students' needs.

Whoever does this role needs time allocating for doing so, and where possible it needs to be granted recognition. One effective way of supporting this approach might be to increase the contact time between staff and students in the first year (Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

At NTU, partially as a consequence of the HERE Project, the University is implementing a tutorial system in 2011-12. The system is designed to help students manage the transition to HE, develop appropriate strategies and importantly to build a close relationship between a tutor and a tutor group of 8 – 12 students.

- **Communication with students**

Doubters at UoB are almost half as likely to believe that their course is well organised as their non-doubting peers (37.1% compared to 69.7%, despite both feeling that this was equally important, 94.4%). This data was reinforced through the student surveys undertaken as part of the programme investigations – where, at Bradford, students on a programme with very high rates of retention were more likely to say they felt valued and that the course was well organised, one student

explaining that: *"All the timetables are available on Blackboard and any changes are sent via email. Also all the module handbooks are available on Blackboard which show how each module is organised."*

Students reported that they felt that keeping them up-to-date with changes and other information was important in creating a relationship between them and staff. Students surveyed during the programme audits reported positively on the importance of staff being responsive to student suggestions about improvements to the course and taking the time to report back about any changes that had been made.

It must be noted that comments from doubters appear to suggest that whilst electronic communication is valuable, personal contact is much more important. A number of doubters reported finding email less satisfactory as a means of communication. Whilst email is clearly far more efficient, students with anxieties may need more personal contact.

- **A shared responsibility to communicate to students**

Whilst students wanted to have a personal point of contact within the programme, they were also influenced by the communication from the whole programme team. It appears important that staff are reminded that poor communication does have an impact, seemingly particularly on student doubters. Doubters appear to need more assistance to understand the nature of higher education, their relationship with staff and so it is particularly important that the whole team communicates to them consistently and effectively.

Recommendation 4) Help students make more informed decisions about choosing the right course in the first place

Course related issues were the most frequently cited reasons for doubting. The further analysis of academic doubts cited by NTU students (2009) showed that *'course not as expected'* was the second most frequently cited reason after *'anxiety about coping'*. Interviews with doubters at Bournemouth and Bradford suggested that some doubters felt that they had chosen their course badly. They had struggled to meaningfully interpret the course marketing material sent to them. One doubter who had entered through clearing felt that they had never fully committed to their course as it was not their first choice.

Doubters found the material provided by the institution prior to arrival less accurate than their non-doubting peers. For example at Bradford in 2009, 24.7% (24 out of 97) of students who thought that information received from the university was accurate had considered withdrawing; whereas 37.5% (3 out of 8) of students who did not think that the information was accurate had doubts. Whilst of course some of this information may have been inaccurate, it also appears likely that, for whatever reason, student doubters had more difficulty interpreting it. Quinn et al (2005) reported that some students may lack the cultural capital to interpret university messages about what the learning experience will be like. One participant in the UK National Student Forum reported that *"I needed more detail on how I would be taught and the course content. And also the learning support that would be available. What are the expectations around essay writing for example? It's a big cultural shift"* (NSF, 2008, p.12). Purnell & Foster (2008) reported that universities have an understandable tension between promoting interesting and exciting messages about life at university and conveying messages about the more humdrum realities of studying.

Yorke and Longden (2008, p.13) refer to the importance of articulating 'the deal' between the institution and the student so that students have a greater chance to understand what to expect from their course/university along with any limitations. In

the current round of changes to the HE sector, universities are expected to offer far greater clarity about information such as contact time and support offered.

One Bournemouth University student doubter felt that they had not sufficiently prepared for the process of applying for university and had therefore not been able to fully comprehend the information made available to them. They offered the following advice to potential students: "*I think do as much research as you can … Try to get as much information as you can about your actual course. Try to visit the uni … Try to find out information from them to determine whether it's the right course and university for you … because if you feel like you're not going to do as well as you could do, or you feel like it's not the right place or the right time to go to university, then you're not going to do as well as you could do … if your heart's not in it you'll probably find yourself struggling or dropping out*" (BU student interview comment).

- **Use of Open Days & other communication channels**

As student doubters report being less satisfied with the pre-arrival communication, we would strongly recommend that programme teams explore ways of improving it, for example through testing it with current students. It is interesting that during the interviews, open days were cited as ways of improving the pre-choice information.

The National Audit Office recommended improving achievement in higher education could be supported through the use of "*Open days, including lectures and opportunities to talk to current students, are critical in helping students understand what the course is about, and what they could expect to do during the course*" (NAO, 2002, p.24). Non-doubters talked extremely positively about the welcome they received at open days and how this had helped them start to feel that they belonged to the university. For example "*From when I came to the open day I felt really happy at Bradford University, and since coming here I have met some wonderful people and have come to feel like Bradford is my home*" (UoB non-doubter comment).

Staff felt that open days had a strong influence on student retention, one lecturer at NTU suggested that "*I would say seven out of ten who want to withdraw… are the people who didn't come to open days.*"

It must, however, be stressed that at the University of Bradford, that 42 of the 210 students who visited the (20.0%) of those who had visited the university prior to making their choice to study here had experienced doubts and 39 out of 196 (19.9%) of those who had not, had experienced doubts. At Bournemouth University[23], students who attended open days were actually more likely to have doubts. 47 of the 128 students (37%) who visited the campus prior to choosing to study there were doubters whereas only 6 of the 43 who did (14%) not were. Clearly the sample size is small, but it does suggest that whilst staff and non-doubters favour open days, doubters did not always find them a useful preparation for university. As is the case with interpreting university literature such as prospectuses, some students may have problems realistically interpreting the positive messages transmitted during open days.

There will be many students who are unable to attend open days for numerous reasons, so open days need offering within an overall programme of communication.

- **Matching students to the course**

During the programme interviews with staff, several academics believed that creating more challenging entry requirements helped improve retention. For example one lecturer at BU stated "*we make our applicants jump through lots of hoops so part of me thinks that actually you just wouldn't go through that unless you really wanted it and you knew this was for you.*" Clearly this is not an option open to all programmes, but it is interesting to note that the programme expected more than simply high entry qualifications, but instead had a number of points of contact at which course staff and students could assess one another.

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[23] At NTU, this question was not asked in an attempt to reduce the size of the survey as additional questions about Welcome Week had been added.

Support Students to Stay

We recommend that the primary strategy should be to prevent students from becoming doubters in the first place by helping them feel engaged and capable of operating in their new environment. However our findings also suggest that actions to help students feel comfortable and confident in their new environment will have a strong supporting benefit.

Recommendation 5) Improve social integration

Social integration appears to be an important factor in retention. Yorke & Longden (2008, p4) recommend *'treating the curriculum as an academic milieu, and also one in which social engagement is fostered'*. In Tinto's retention model (1993) engagement within the social environment is treated equally to engagement within the academic environment. When tested in 2011, students who had not doubted were more likely to report having a larger circle of friends.

Figure 26 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU How many good friends have you made since starting at University?

Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU
How many good friends have you made since starting at University?

Category	Doubters	Non doubters
7+	24%	32%
5-6	16%	19%
3-4	32%	31%
1-2	21%	14%
None	8%	4%
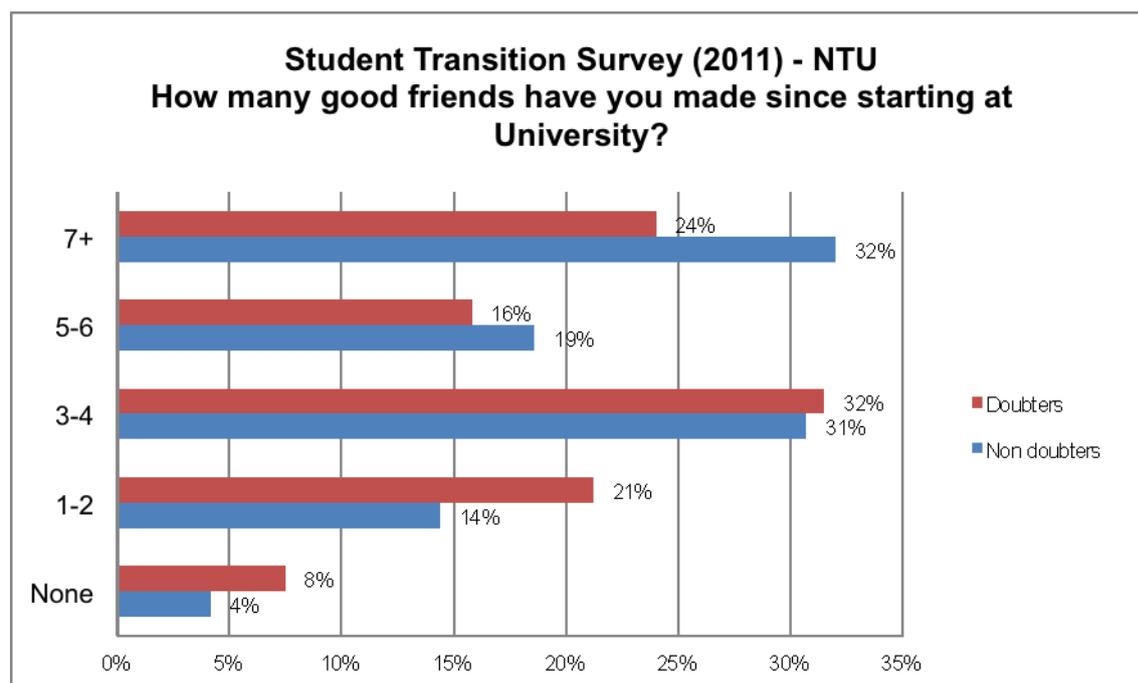
In 2009, the most important reason cited by doubters at all three institutions for staying at university was support from friends and family. For example *"my new friends have been able to help me get through many hardships, so they are part of the reason why I have been able to stay"* (UoB student comment). At NTU when 'support from family and friends' was further subdivided, 'friends made at university' was the most important single group.

In the 2009 doubters survey NTU students rated the importance of the factor 'My fellow students are supportive' lowly. Only 68% of all students thought that this factor was important placing it 13th of 17 Student Experience Factors. Interestingly, 70% felt that they had experienced supportive peers. In other words, more students reported having supportive peers than actually thought it was important. In 2011, the methodology for asking students about reasons to stay changed. Students were asked to choose options from a range of choices and to identify the *most important* reasons for staying. Friendships were scarcely identified as the most important reason to stay. However, at NTU, 'friends made at university' were still the second most frequently mentioned reason to stay (when *multiple* responses were allowed).

Furthermore, doubters are less likely to report that their course is friendly.

Figure 27 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – NTU. Perceived friendliness of course

	How friendly is your course? (4 – 5 out of 5)	
	Doubters	Non-doubters
NTU	67.9%	76.7%
BU	52.0%	78.5%
UoB	32.1%*	56.3%
	*For those students with serious doubts, this falls to 27.3%	

Student doubters also cited the lack of social opportunities as a factor that led them to consider doubting. In many respects, our doubters report similar problems to those found by Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005), namely that they had difficulty breaking into cliques formed early in the first term.

We note with some concern that between 2009 and 2011, students report a lower level of satisfaction with their social lives. Between the two surveys, if anything, the partner institutions have sought to improve the social and community opportunities available through better design and use of campus space. It appears likely that the change in perception is due to the fact that over the two year gap, the current economic climate has worsened. We understand following conversations with our institutional job shops that there are fewer casual jobs available for students and so it may be that students have less income available to spend on a social life.

Figure 28 - Student Transition Surveys 2009, 2011, enjoyable social life (4-5 out of 5)
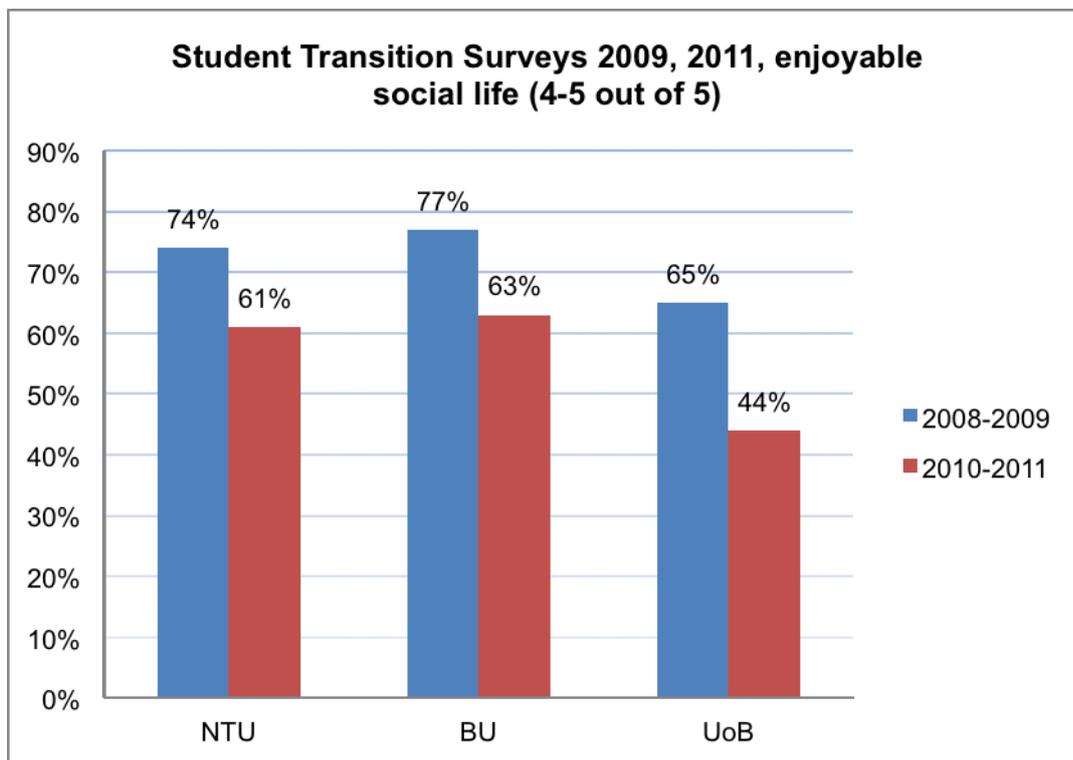
Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005) reported that students predominantly made friends through their accommodation; course and clubs and societies were the next most common places to make friends, but to a much lesser extent. However, in 2011, researchers at NTU used the Welcome Week survey to ask where had students made friends during their first weeks at university. Whilst accommodation was an important place to make friends, it is interesting to note that more students

felt that they had made friends through their course. Since 2008, NTU has identified *'opportunities to make friends'* as the most important priority for course inductions.

Figure 29 - Welcome Week Survey (2010) - NTU Where have you made friends? (n=992)
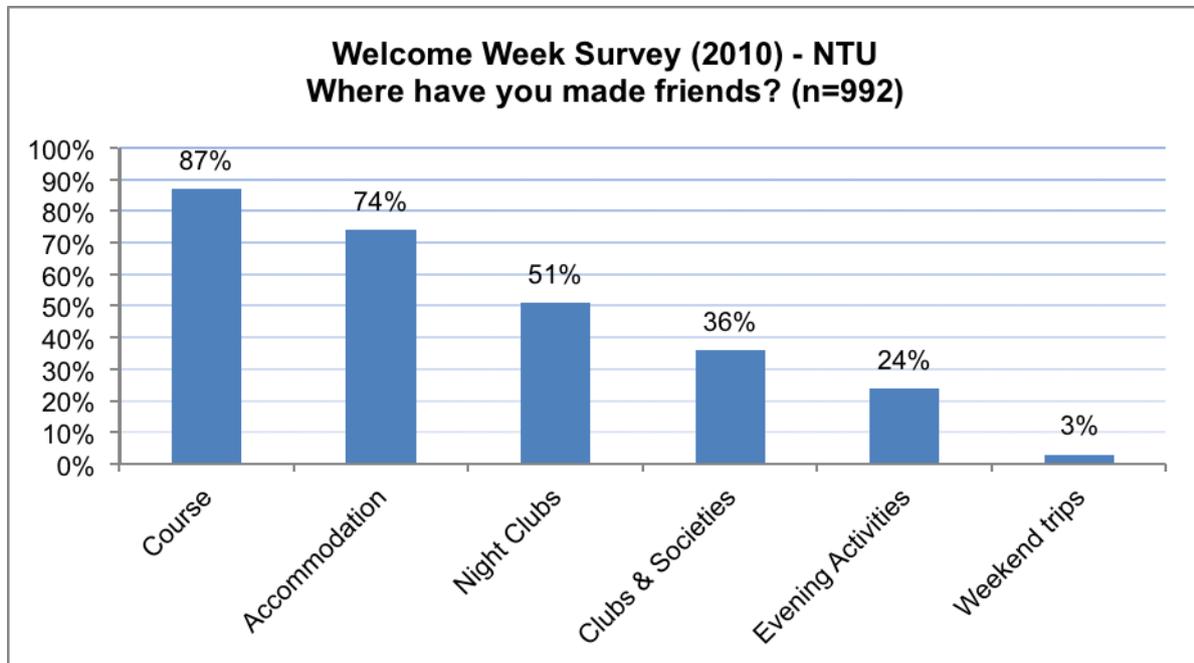
It therefore appears clear that there are opportunities for students to socialise and create support networks within the programme.

- **Pre-arrival activities including social networking**

Whilst most students are highly literate using social networking sites, not all students found that they were able to meet course peers through these methods. In 2011, BU students were asked which online resources they had used prior to arriving at university. The respondents were then compared against incidences of doubting.

Figure 30 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – BU Which online resources have you used?

Online resource	Total students who used the resource (n=209 from 172 respondents)	Total number of doubters	Percentage doubters
UCAS (yougo.co.uk)	130	40	30.7%
ok group	60	20	33.3%
Stepping Stones 2HE	12	2	16.7%
Other	7	2	28.6%

A relatively small number of students used Stepping Stones 2HE and clearly the fact that they used the resource suggests a good level of motivation. Nonetheless, this appears to provide a cautionary tale. UK universities are embracing social networking sites as part of marketing and transition strategies. However, it appears that in this instance, that Stepping Stones 2HE has a greater benefit on helping students make the transition to HE.

Stepping Stones 2HE provides students with short online pre-arrival activities to participate in. These are then integrated into the early programme induction (Keenan, 2008).The programme induction activities contain a strong element of small group work to encourage students to work together. One Bournemouth University student explained how Stepping Stones 2HE helped develop friendships across the cohort [We had] *"… to design a poster about a computing expert and the people I had in that group are still my group of friends now."*

We therefore recommend that institutions consider ways of enabling pre-arrival, course-based peer-to-peer conversations through social media, and strive to start community building *within* the programmes.

- **Programme induction**

In Figure 29, we show that the course can be a location in which students can make friends and develop a support network. NTU has studied student reactions to programme induction since 2008 and recommends actions such as the use of icebreakers, small group work and other activities that engender opportunities for developing friendship groups. From 2011 onwards, all programmes have placed extensive information about the course induction online for new students to help them understand in more detail what to expect. Furthermore, inductions will be used to more explicitly introduce students to their tutorial groups as a strategy for community building over the course of the year.

- **Group work (particularly field trips)**

Student interviewees reported that group projects had been particularly effective for making friends. Interestingly, fieldwork activities were felt to be particularly effective environments for developing social ties. *"I've never been so homesick as I was that weekend … but what it did do was really pulled [together] our friendships … because we were feeling a bit out of our depth … then when you came back after, then you really felt that you knew people"* (BU student). As the quote describes, weekend and overnight trips appear to have a stronger impact than day trips. However, Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) suggest that whilst shared experiences can function as shared rites of passage, they can have an excluding effect on those unwilling or unable to participate, so ought to be used as part of a range of activities.

- **Peer support**

Student interviewees suggested that they benefitted not just academically, but also socially from the Peer Assisted Learning activities. PAL delivered within the programme can also create additional opportunities for students to work and talk with their peers in small groups. The student PAL leaders used simple activities such as ice breakers and these were responded to positively by the interviewees. *"In a PAL session, we had to say our names, where we are from and something unique about ourselves. I found that everyone let their guards down, so we could start getting to know each other"* (BU student).

Recommendation 6) Improve a sense of belonging to the programme

Doubters appeared to feel less like they fitted in to their programme than non-doubters. In the interviews with student doubters they describe feeling that they were struggling to adjust to the new reality as a university student, felt that social opportunities were limited and felt less at ease in the course and on the campus. Some recognised that although there were social activities taking place around them, they did not feel comfortable taking part.

In the 2009 NTU focus group interviews, it was very striking that the non-doubting students could all recall a moment in time when they had started to feel that they belonged to the university. For some, this was through joining clubs and societies, for others it was beginning to feel that they recognised people around them as their peers. *"I think it starts when you walk down the street and you see someone and you say "hey … I know them from university" … that's what made me feel like [I belonged]"* (NTU student non-doubter). Although not all doubters were able to express a time when they felt they belonged, those who did similarly describe the importance of feeling comfortable with people and the physical environment. For example *'I feel better now because now I feel like I know where everything is and [if I] see someone walking around that I know I want to stop and talk to them'* (NTU student doubter who decided to stay).

Earlier in this report (13c), we described how doubters report feeling less clear about university processes and less certain about their relationships with peers and tutors. It appears that that doubters are semi-detached from the university environment and far less firmly fixed to the institution than their non-doubting peers.

Figure 31 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – all 3 institutions How much do you feel you belong or 'fit in' here?

	How much do you feel you belong or 'fit in' here? (4 or 5 out of 5)	
	Doubters	Non-doubters
NTU	47.3%	77.1%
BU	54.7%	82.9%
UoB	33.4%*	64.7%
*22.2% amongst those with the strongest doubts (4 or 5 out of 5)		

Our evidence appears to suggest that the students' sense of belonging is developed through good relationships with their peers and tutors, a sense of cohort identity and a sense of belonging to their particular university campus.

- **Developing good relationships with peers**

See 13.5 Improve social integration for further information

- **Developing a good working relationship with tutors**

See 13.2 Improve the communication and relationship with staff

- **Developing a sense of community within the programme**

One staff member interviewed at NTU during the programme audits explained that *'I would like to … mention that issue of identity… students have often come from educational settings where they have had a really clear identity … when they come to university it can be very difficult [as] they are not scheduled 9-5 each day to attend lectures to develop that identity. I think HE can overestimate the opportunities students have to feel a sense of belonging. Not everyone wants to join the football team.'* They emphasised the importance of timetabling group activities and long

lunch breaks during Welcome Week to create opportunities for students to feel part of a course community.

Student interviewees suggest that course-based events are a good way to bring people together. *'Socials are the only way to do it really'* (BU student interviewee)

One lecturer described the importance students of having teaching space that was identified as belonging to the programme. Students appeared to like feeling that they had space that they belonged to.

- **Developing a sense of belonging to the wider university community**

Although Kember, Lee & Li (2001) suggest that the primary sense of identity students have is with the course, a number of our respondents explained that they felt an association with the university too. Some students describe that this develops through membership of clubs and societies and through using university sports and social facilities. One explained that a sense of belonging came from *'really simple things like … finding somewhere I could sit down and have lunch and feel comfortable like I could sit there…'* (NTU student interviewee). One of the Bradford student interviewees described the importance of feeling connected to the rest of the university though simple activities such as *'I do take an interest in what's going on, you know like reading different posters and stuff dotted around.'*

In 2011, researchers at BU and UoB asked students what additional social activities they would like their universities to offer.

Figure 32 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – UoB and BU - Possible additional social activities provided by the university requested by students (n= 3,221 responses from 611 respondents)

Event	UoB All respondents	%	BU all respondents	%
Day trips	202	8.52	75	8.83
Film nights	191	8.05	70	8.24
Course Socials	186	7.84	90	10.60
Comedy events	185	7.80	75	8.83
Open lectures (by guest speakers)	178	7.50	70	8.24
School/department socials	178	7.50	63	7.42
Gigs	167	7.04	84	9.89
Balls (club/society/school etc)	165	6.96	64	7.54
Theatre productions	161	6.79	52	6.12
Cultural activities	160	6.75	42	4.95
Sporting events (as a participant)	157	6.62	50	5.89
Sporting events (as a spectator)	155	6.53	52	6.12
Religious events	147	6.20	23	2.71
Political events	140	5.90	39	4.59

At the start of each academic year, NTU provides a programme of social, cultural academic and sporting activities known as Welcome Week. The Week provides approximately 350 opportunities for students to start to construct social support networks. These range from small scale cultural activities such as participating in a reading group to a large scale 'It's a Knockout' competition known as Saturday

Antics. In 2011, researchers at NTU asked students whether or not Welcome Week had helped them to make friends. It appeared that doubters were less likely to have found the first week useful for making friends.

Figure 33 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU How useful did you find Welcome Week for making friends? (n = 452)
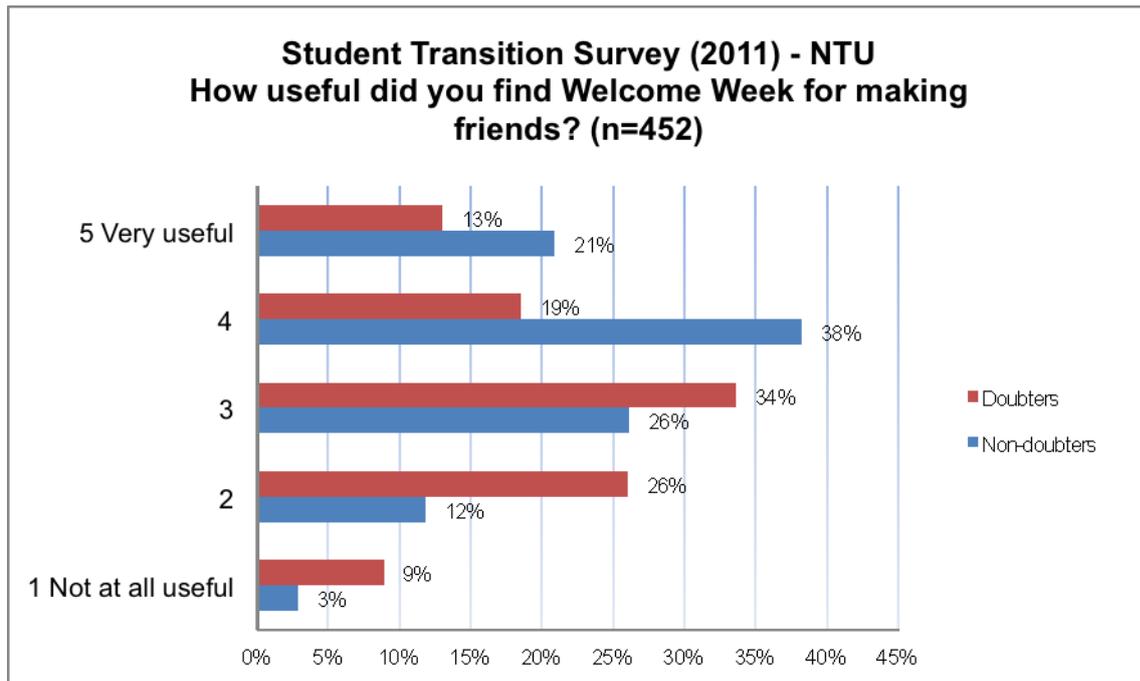
Recommendation 7) Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can help achieve their future goals

The most commonly cited reason in the October 2008 pilot study (NTU) for staying related to the future goal of wanting to go to university: *"I didn't want to prolong coming to Uni"*. The second most common reason was 'future goals, particularly employment'. The joint fourth reason related to 'determination and internal factors', for example *"I hate quitters! I will always continue until the end…"*. In the 2009 survey, 'future goals and employment' and 'determination/ internal factors' were amongst the top three reasons to stay at all partner institutions. In the 2011 student transition survey, doubters were asked what was the most important reasons that they had stayed at university. In all three institutions 'personal determination' was the most commonly cited response and 'future goals', the second most common.

Figure 34 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – all 3 institutions Most important reason to stay (n=339)

Most important reason for deciding to stay	1st – Personal determination to stick at it	2nd – Future goals/employment
NTU	37.9%	22.6%
BU	51.2%	14.6%
UoB	34.6%	15.4%

The two factors appeared interlinked. For example, *"I enjoy education and wanted to spend more time developing and improving myself … I wanted to get better skills that would make me more attractive to employers and enable me to get the job I want"* (BU doubter)

"When I have got 5 essays to write [I think] how am I gonna manage it, but I always have managed it!...it is that desire to do this, I want to put a cap and gown on and say yeah you can do it, you are never too old, you can fit it round your family and fit it

round a job. There is a point to prove...it is really proving it to myself and yeah the desire for learning… There is so much out there that I want to know about...it is my own motivation" (UoB Doubter)

It is interesting to note that doubters are less likely to believe that the course will help them achieve their future goals.

Figure 35 - Student Transition Survey (2009 and 2011) – all institutions Students who agreed with the statement 'Completing my course/degree will help me achieve my future goals' (n=1,936)

	Completing my course/degree will help me achieve my future goals (rated 4 or 5 out of 5)			
	2011		2009	
	Doubters	Non-doubters	Doubters	Non-doubters
NTU	75.4%	91.5%	77%	91.0%
BU	76.9%	100%	85.0%	96.0%
UoB	77.8%	88.8%	82.9%	93.3%

Motivation is largely an internal factor and essentially the responsibility of the individual. However in our study we found that there were a number of ways that the programme teams could create an environment conducive to students motivating themselves. It may be particularly valuable to help students see 'possible selves' Plimmer & Schmidt (2007). Stevenson et al. (2010) highlight how institutions can impact on possible selves – both in terms of offering advice/mentoring and giving a context for these selves to develop. They argue that it is important that staff are known to students and there are opportunities for interaction and reflection. Stevenson & Clegg (2010) also suggest that valuing students in the present can play a positive role looking forward. If we consider student engagement in terms of agency then it could be possible to help individuals to adapt to or change their circumstances. As Mann (2008) states: "Agency arises in the capacity of the individual to make sense of their own particular circumstances in their own way and

in the individual's capacity to transform these. Such action can be both individual and *collective*." (my italics on collective). Therefore engagement, motivation and what students are or are not aiming for is not necessarily predetermined or static, but that the student and the university – both staff and other students can help to co-create positive environments and positive self-perceptions of individuals within these (i.e. – through our themes) that may positively impact upon retention and engagement.

Activities included:

- ### Relationships with staff & behavioural expectations

As noted in 13c, it appears that the relationship with staff is important. A number of doubters reported that if they felt no-one was interested if they attended or not, this was likely to be demotivating. Whilst it may be preferable for students to not need this form of checking, it does perhaps reflect students' prior experience in education. At UoB a number of students were aware that they were monitored and some saw this as motivating. A number of staff reported that they made a conscious effort to celebrate student success, for example *"tell them what a great job they've done … they are looking for recognition. They are looking for immediate feedback, immediate reward even though these are intangible … just appreciation of the work they've done."* (BU Staff member)

Staff interviewees reported that they found it valuable to discuss expectations with students either during induction activities or through formats such as codes of conduct and learning contracts.

- ### Preparation for future roles

Students appear to want reassurance that their degree will help them achieve their future goals. Student doubters appeared to respond positively to activities that help them to understand how actions in the first year will help them prepare for future employability. For example *"Use of teacher practitioners to give perspective in the real world"* (UoB student describing what their course did best).

Students responded positively to activities within the curriculum that enabled them to glimpse the opportunities that their course provided. Clearly this is important in courses with a vocational perspective *"I know what I want out of it and it will be better for my future career" (*BU student). However, it also appeared important to students who were not on vocational courses: *"There is a brilliant variety of modules within my course and I like this as it gives me an idea of what options I can do in the future as I'm not sure what I would like to do as a career"* (BU student).

Support can also be gained from professional advisers outside the curriculum, for example *"Through guidance from a careers adviser, I know the steps I need to take to achieve my future goals"* (NTU student).

- **Real work experience, field work and placements**

Placements appear to be valuable motivators as they help students to both develop skills and knowledge relevant to possible future roles, but also allow students to imagine themselves in these new roles. For example at Bournemouth University, one of the programmes sampled provided students with an opportunity to participate in fieldwork during their first week at university. *"We make a point of … making sure that students can see how their interest could be developed into work skills through engagement in fieldwork .. I think that is a big part of making students feel that they're able to put their enjoyment into action that will actually get them work…"* (BU staff member).

One of the Bournemouth University programmes also provides a 'placement and international fieldwork fair' in which first year students can see poster presentations by, and interact with, second and final year students describing their placement and fieldwork experience. This activity was felt by staff to help build cohesion within programmes and also help first year students to see *how "students just one year ahead of them have already really got involved … I think that's really important … giving them the push to get involved and also the confidence to see it's something they can do"* (BU staff member).

Recommendation 8) Encourage students' active engagement with the curriculum

It appears important to all students to have enthusiastic lecturers and an interesting subject to study. In the 2009 student transition survey, these factors were in the top 5 most important Student Experience Factors at all three institutions. As with most of the factors, doubters rated the experience lower than non-doubters. When the factors were tested again in 2011 the differences were:

Figure 36 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - all institutions I find my course interesting & I have enthusiastic lecturers (n=1,063)

	I find my course interesting		I have enthusiastic lecturers	
	Doubters	Non-doubters	Doubters	Non-doubters
NTU	63.7%	85.9%	55.4%	68.3%
BU	49.1%	87.0%	49.1%	72.9%
UoB	66.6%	78.0%	45.7%	61.2%

In the 2009 student transition survey, the second most common reason cited by doubters for staying was 'adapting to the course/university'. Doubters reported that they had found a number of factors enjoyable and rewarding including *'interesting study materials'*, the *'wide variety of modules available'* and *'practical components which enhance learning'*. One of the NTU doubters interviewed in the 2009 focus groups reported that *"I think the best things have been the programme, the contents of the programme and the approach to teaching, [this] is very engaging [for] students."* (NTU student doubter). Further analysis at NTU (2009) found an association between increased confidence and whether students found the subject interesting[24].

In 2011, the team at NTU analysed the responses provided to the question "What makes your subject personally interesting to you?" Doubters and non-doubters

[24] See Appendix 4.

provided largely the same types answers with some slight variations. Non-doubters appear to slightly more likely to find the intrinsic subject interesting. For example *"I am fascinated by my subject, I can't explain why but I love learning about organisms and how they work"* (NTU non-doubter). Doubters were more likely to cite aspects of the learning and teaching experience as important reasons for generating interest. For example *"The discussions, the theories and arguments promoted … really open your mind up to new ways in which to think about photography"* (NTU student doubter). Whilst it appears that the factors closely overlap, this does suggest that even though doubters may be less intrinsically interested in the subject matter, this can be ameliorated through the use of interesting learning and teaching techniques.

Figure 37 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU - What makes the subject personally interesting - student doubters

What makes your subject personally interesting to you?
(NTU Student Transition Survey 2011, doubters, 105 responses)

- Aspects of learning & teaching are interesting — 44%
- The topic is intrinsically interesting — 34%
- Future goals/relevance to workplace — 14%
- Teaching staff — 6%
- Other — 2%
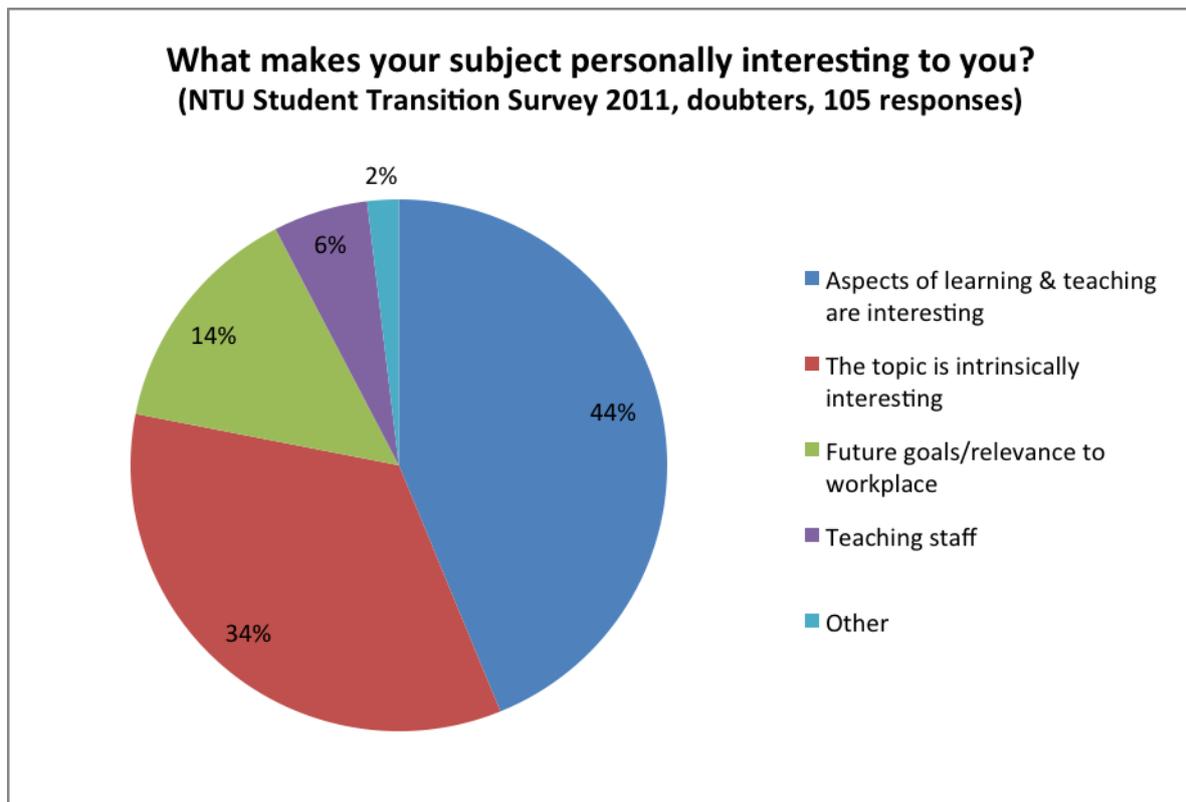
Figure 38 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU What makes the subject personally interesting – student non-doubters

What makes your subject personally interesting to you?
(NTU Student Transition Survey 2011, Non-doubters, 282 responses)

- Aspects of learning & teaching are interesting — 37%
- Subject is intrinsically interesting — 40%
- Future goals/relevance to workplace — 18%
- Teaching staff — 5%
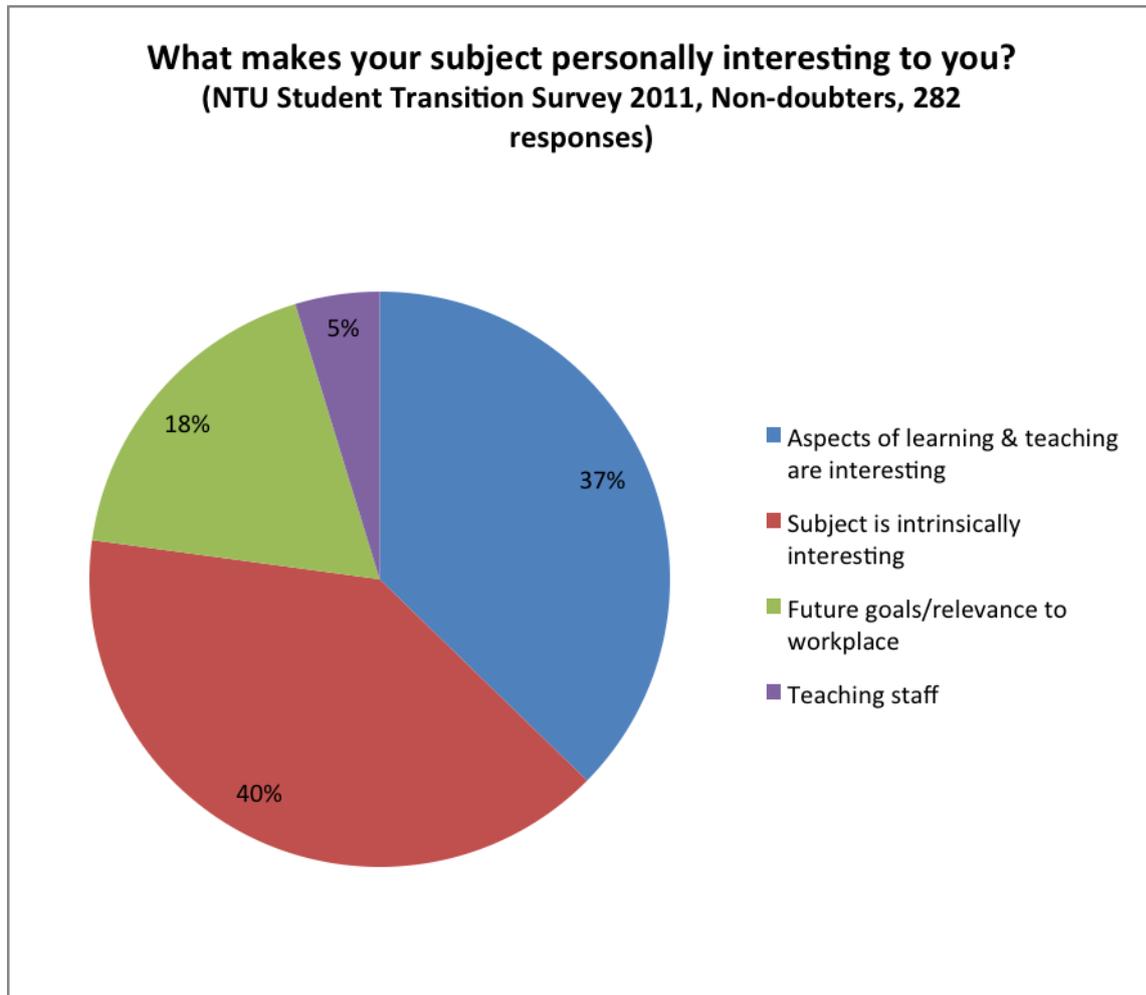
There are a number of strategies that appear to help engage students with the learning experience, these include:

- **Encourage active learning**

One programme at BU makes extensive use of real life projects *"Every year we have lots of our students being involved working with the National Trust, working with the RSPB doing practical conservation work that's related to research work that we're doing here so I think they can see how it all joins up and I think that's really important … it's about preparing them for their life and that they can take control of how they build that degree and the surrounding experience to make it possible for them to live the career and the life they want to lead"* (BU staff comment).

- **Teaching to engage first year students**

Although overall, doubters are less likely to perceive their lecturers to be enthusiastic, a number of doubters responded positively to enthusiastic teaching staff, for example *"the lecturers' clear passion and commitment to the subject they are teaching is reflected in their lectures"* (BU student). Programme teams therefore considered it fundamental to recruit the most suitable people to teach first year students and encouraged their staff to evaluate and review practice in order to continually improve the learning experience for students. This reflects recommendations from Yorke and Longden (2008, p.48) that *'those teaching first-year students should have a strong commitment to teaching and learning'*.

- **Varied learning experiences**

Staff interviewees reported trying to provide interesting and varied learning experiences for students, including *"It's the most important thing, I feel we are doing that – challenging them, trying to mould them…we have fun, interesting lectures, not just passive learning. We give them something different"* (UoB staff comment). Staff interviewees were aware that there are problems with teaching large cohorts and so sought out ways of providing varied learning. *"It's not teaching in a great big lecture hall for a long time but getting them into groups. It's getting them to discuss their own experiences, to value their experiences and what they bring to the learning…so listening to that and getting them to bounce ideas off one another"* (BU staff comment). Several students reported that the use of technology helped make the learning experience more interesting. *"Lecturers are very inspiring, they try to make every lecture as memorable and interesting as they can. They use different activities and show various topic-related videos which help to understand the material better and maintain the interest in the subject"* (UoB student comment).
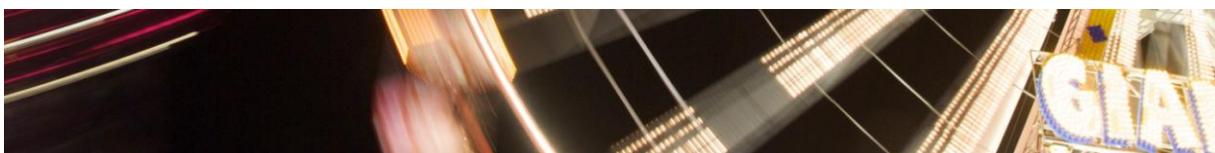
Recommendation 9) Ensure that there is good communication and access to additional student support

The focus of our research has been primarily in the programme. Doubts appear to primarily arise here and the second strand of our research was focussed upon the course's impact. We define additional support as that provided by specialists such as financial advisers, counsellors, careers advisers, chaplains, disability specialists etc. Support from these services was reported by relatively few doubters as a reason to stay. However, when individual doubters were interviewed, they were often extremely effusive about the support offered to them by professional services. *"I have used the student support centre which has been incredibly helpful with giving me support ... Without student support services I would have left. Having dyslexia it has been the most significant factor to choosing and continuing at NTU"* (NTU doubter on their reason to stay). *"[The International Student Office] saved my life, [in] my first week...they showed me everything I needed to know. Literally"* (UoB student comment)

We recognise the importance that these staff have supporting student doubters and suggest two areas for action:

- **Raise student awareness of the services available**

Doubters surveyed in 2011 at University of Bradford and Bournemouth University appear less likely to be aware of the support services available.

Figure 39 – Student Transition Survey (2011) – BU and UoB Student awareness of support services

How did you become aware of the support services available to you at university?	UoB			BU		
	Doubters	Non-doubters	Overall	Doubters	Non-doubters	Overall
Induction	51.9%	61.1%	57.0%	42.3%	65.7%	55.6%
Website	34.6%	50.7%	46.3%	34.6%	38.6%	36.6%
Tutor	39.5%	46.8%	44.0%	26.9%	41.4%	35.5%
Other university staff	27.2%	30.5%	29.1%	13.5%	22.9%	18.5%
Friends	24.7%	40.4%	34.0%	17.3%	12.9%	15.3%
I do not feel that I am aware of what is available to me	17.3%	10.3%	12.0%	38.5%	14.3%	25.0%

One academic school at UoB has sought to address this by placing an additional member of support staff within the normal learning and teaching space. *"[This role] could include anything really – personal problems, or just guiding people to the right*

place, or… say I want to organise an event and I didn't really know how to do it, I would go and talk to the student liaison officer and ask for some advice and some help. Or if I am not satisfied with the course or any academic matter I can also talk to the[m]…it is very, very valuable. I don't know if any other departments have the student liaison position…" (UoB student comment).

- **Ensure that programme teams know how to refer students to professional and specialist support**

Most universities have teams of specialist staff trained to support individuals and groups of students with particular needs that augment the pastoral support offered by programme teams. We would suggest that programme teams periodically remind themselves of the services available and how to contact these teams. One of the programme teams surveyed at NTU circulates a Student Support Services guide, 'the student support directory' amongst the team. *"We download it and send it to the programme team and point staff to it so they are aware … it is important for us not to think we can solve everything. It is good to know there is support out there"* (NTU staff).
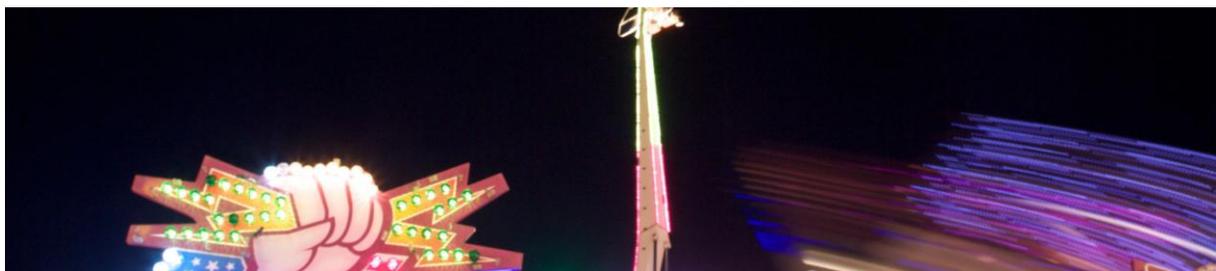
Section 14 - Evaluation evidence to support your key messages

Section 14 provides additional charts and further information to support section 13 (which in turn corresponds to the executive summary). Section 14 corresponds to Section 13. So, for example, 14b provides additional information for 13b 'doubters are more likely to leave than non-doubters'.

Finding a) Approximately one third of first year students have experienced doubts sufficiently strong to make them consider withdrawing at some point during the first year.

We refer throughout this report to students who have considered leaving as doubters, those who have not, as non-doubters.

The student transition survey (2009 and 2011) asked first year students whether they had considered withdrawing at any point during their first year at university. It was found that approximately one third of students within these samples had considered withdrawing.

Figure 40 - Student Transition Survey (2009) – all institutions

Student Transition Survey 2009	NTU	BU	UoB
Total Respondents (n=873)	656	89	128
Response rate	9%	3%	5%
Number of Doubters (n=320)	243	40	37
Percentage of Doubters (average percentage = 37.7%)	37.04%	44.94%	28.91%

Figure 41 - Student Transition Survey (2011)– all institutions

Student Transition Survey 2011	NTU	BU	UoB
Total Respondents (n=1063)	452	172	439
Number of doubters (n=339)	145	74	120
Percentage of doubters (average percentage = 34.15)	32.08%	43.02%	27.33%

The data below was taken from students who granted us permission to track continuation in the 2009 student transition surveys. We use the term 'continuation' to match up to the HESA data, it indicates students who have progressed to the second year, are repeating elements of the their first year, or have transferred within the institution.

Finding b) Doubters are more likely to leave than non-doubters

Figure 42 - Data analysis based on continuation rates in December 2009 from all institutions

	NTU	BU	UoB
Number of students who granted permission to monitor progression (n=483)	370	52	61
Total Continuers (average = 95.6%)	354 (95.7%)	49 (94.23%)	59 (96.72%)
Total withdrawn students	16	3	2
Total non-doubters	234	29	38
Non-doubters who continued	230 (98.29%)	21 (96.55%)	38 (100%)
Non-doubters who withdrew	4	1	0
Total doubters	136	23	23
Doubters who continued	124 (91.18%)	21 (91.3%)	21 (91.3%)
Doubters who withdrew	12	2	2
Institutional continuation rate 2008-09	93.7%	93.7%	88.5%
2008/09 HESA Benchmarks	91.9%	91.4%	89.9%

Finding c) Student doubters described a poorer quality of experience than non-doubters

In both 2009 and 2011, students were asked to rate various aspects of their experience so far. For nearly all the aspects, those students who had considered leaving university rated their experiences less highly than those who had not considered doing so. This was common across all three institutions. One particular factor of note is that doubters are much less likely to say they can cope with their studies/coursework. However, there were issues of note for most of the experiences factors and these helped, in part, to establish the project's themes – which are illustrated in the figures below.

Figures 43 - 48

Student Transition Survey – Student Experience Factors – Differences between student non-doubters and doubters

- Nottingham Trent University 2009
- Bournemouth University 2009
- University of Bradford 2009

- Nottingham Trent University 2011
- Bournemouth University 2011
- University of Bradford 2011

Figure 43 - Student Transition Survey (2009) - NTU– Student Experience Factors - differences between the experiences of non-doubters and

doubters

	Doubters	Non-Doubters
The feedback I receive about my work is useful	44.0%	64.0%
The assessment on my course is what I expected it to be	46.0%	67.0%
My taught sessions (such as lectures, seminars) are interesting	43.0%	68.0%
My subject is interesting	73.0%	92.0%
My fellow students are supportive	58.0%	77.0%
My family is supportive	76.0%	88.0%
My course is well organised	48.0%	66.0%
Lecturers are accessible	54.0%	74.0%
I would know where to go within the university if I had a problem	40.0%	55.0%
I like the house/flat/halls that I am living in	49.0%	65.0%
I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course	53.0%	75.0%
I have easy access to University resources (eg. computers, books)	78.0%	84.0%
I have an enjoyable social life	61.0%	81.0%
I feel valued by teaching staff	34.0%	58.0%
I feel confident that I can cope with my coursework	39.0%	78.0%
I am confident that I will have enough money to complete my course	33.0%	55.0%
Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals	77.0%	91.0%

Figure 44 - Student Transition Survey (2009) – BU Student Experience Factors - differences between the experiences of non-doubters and doubters

Factor	Non-Doubters	Doubters
The feedback I receive about my work is useful	55.0%	47.5%
The assessment on my course is what I expected it to be	64.0%	42.5%
My taught sessions (such as lectures, seminars) are interesting	66.0%	52.5%
My subject is interesting	96.0%	70.0%
My fellow students are supportive	74.0%	76.9%
My family is supportive	85.0%	87.5%
My course is well organised	49.0%	35.0%
Lecturers are accessible	68.0%	62.5%
I would know where to go within the university if I had a problem	70.0%	45.0%
I like the house/flat/halls that I am living in	78.0%	65.0%
I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course	74.4%	45.0%
I have easy access to University resources (eg. computers, books)	91.4%	67.5%
I have an enjoyable social life	75.6%	77.0%
I feel valued by teaching staff	45.7%	32.5%
I feel confident that I can cope with my coursework	72.0%	45.0%
I am confident that I will have enough money to complete my course	66.7%	47.5%
Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals	96.0%	85.0%

Figure 45 - Student Transition Survey (2009) – UoB – Student Experience Factors - differences between the experiences of non-doubters and doubters

Factor	Non-Doubters	Doubters
The feedback I receive about my work is useful	60.0%	34.3%
The assessment on my course is what I expected it to be	64.5%	34.3%
My taught sessions (such as lectures, seminars) are interesting	64.4%	51.4%
My subject is interesting	88.9%	82.9%
My fellow students are supportive	81.1%	68.6%
My family is supportive	84.4%	77.1%
My course is well organised	69.7%	37.1%
Lecturers are accessible	74.1%	62.9%
I would know where to go within the university if I had a problem	67.4%	60.0%
I like the house/flat/halls that I am living in	60.5%	48.6%
I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course	66.7%	71.4%
I have easy access to University resources (eg. computers, books)	91.1%	74.3%
I have an enjoyable social life	70.4%	51.4%
I feel valued by teaching staff	59.5%	45.7%
I feel confident that I can cope with my coursework	68.9%	28.6%
I am confident that I will have enough money to complete my course	60.0%	40.0%
Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals	93.3%	82.9%

Figure 46 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – NTU Student Experience Factors - differences between the experiences of non-doubters and doubters

(NB: Questions on confidence, accessible tutors and feedback were not asked at NTU in 2011)

Working hard at my studies is important to me *
- Non-doubters: 93.8%
- Doubters: 92.4%

My course is friendly *
- Non-doubters: 76.7%
- Doubters: 67.9%

I have enthusiastic lecturers
- Non-doubters: 68.3%
- Doubters: 55.4%

I have an enjoyable social life at University
- Non-doubters: 67.6%
- Doubters: 46.5%

I find my course interesting
- Non-doubters: 85.9%
- Doubters: 63.7%

I feel I belong/ 'fit in' *
- Non-doubters: 77.1%
- Doubters: 47.3%

Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals
- Non-doubters: 91.5%
- Doubters: 75.4%

Figure 47 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – BU Student Experience Factors - differences between the experiences of non-doubters and doubters NB (*=Questions not asked in 2009)

Chart data (Non-doubters / Doubters):

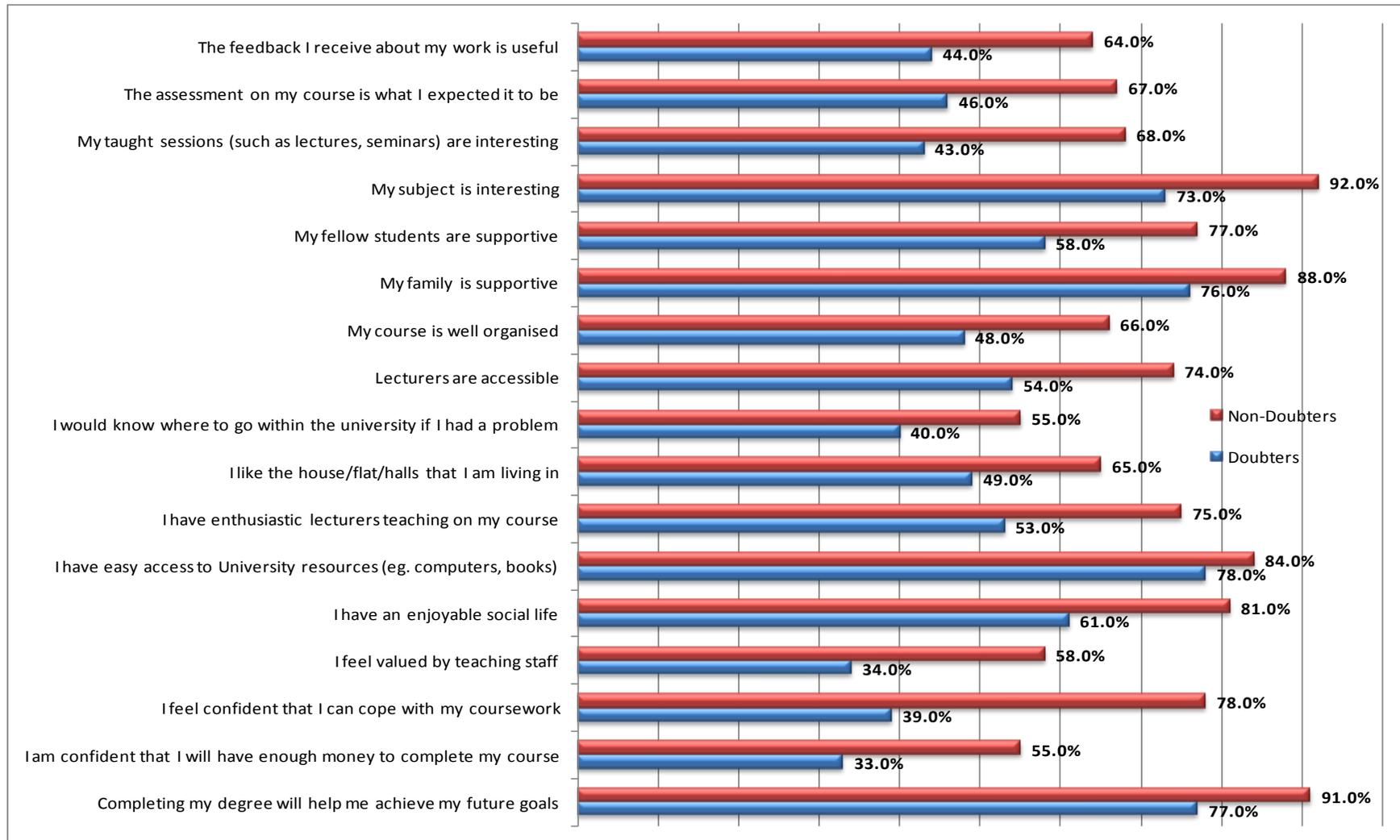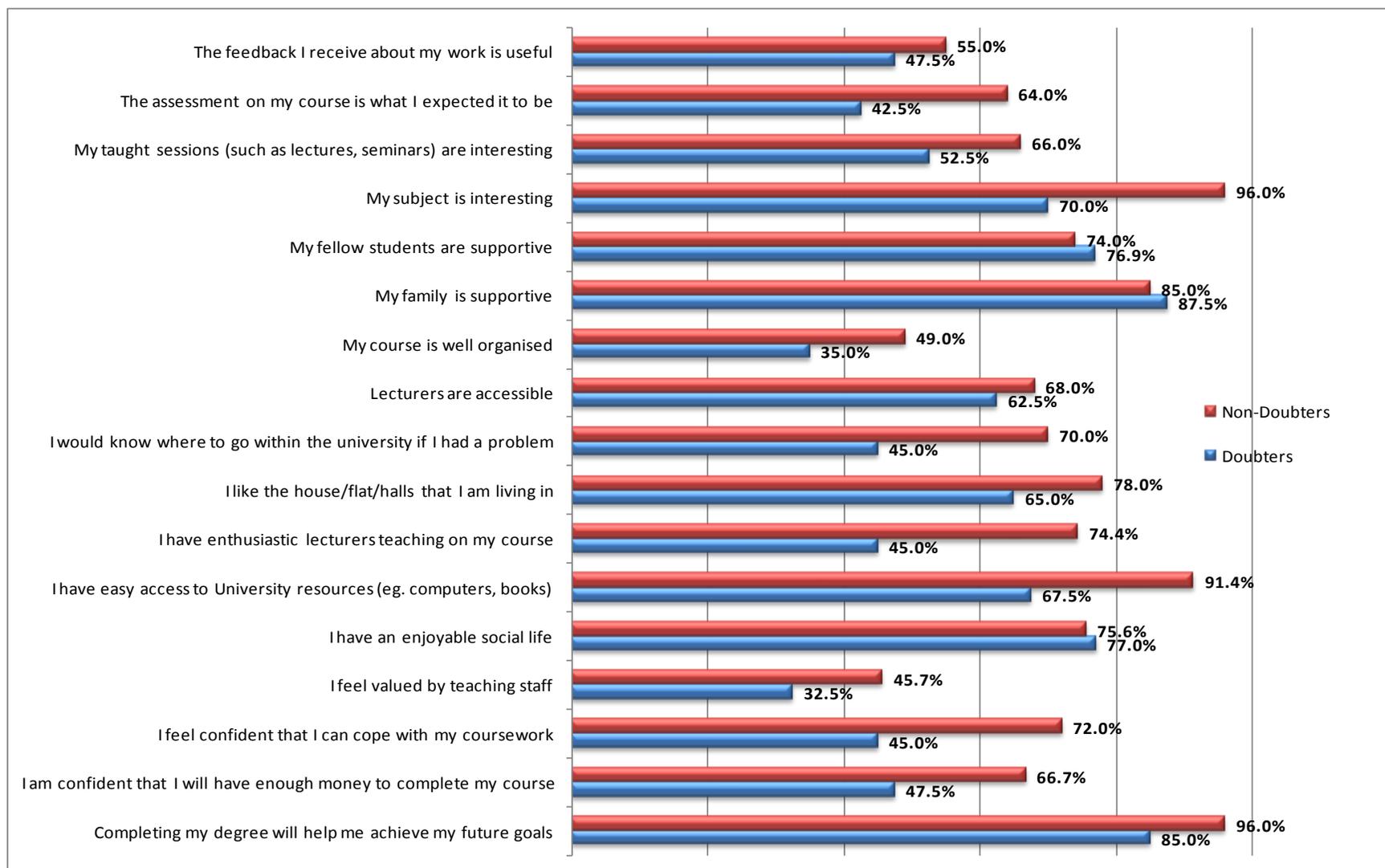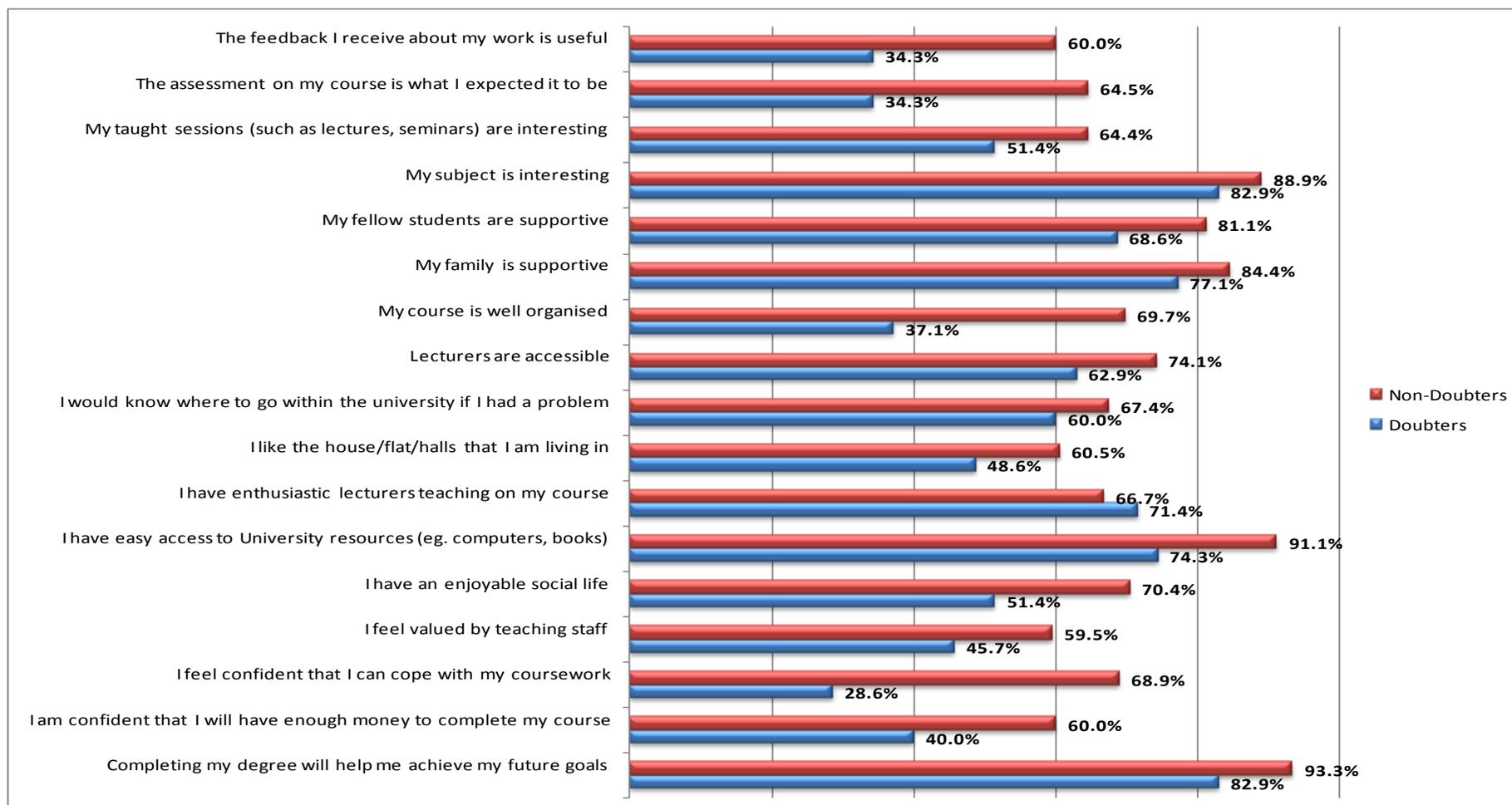| Factor	Non-doubters	Doubters
Working hard at my studies is important to me *	81.4%	56.6%
The feedback I have received about my work has been useful	62.9%	34.0%
My tutors are accessible	68.6%	43.4%
My course is friendly *	78.6%	51.9%
I have enthusiastic lecturers	72.9%	49.1%
I have an enjoyable social life at University	68.6%	55.8%
I find my course interesting	87.0%	49.1%
I feel I belong/ 'fit in' *	82.9%	54.7%
I feel confident I can cope with my coursework	82.9%	66.0%
Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals	100.0%	76.9%

Figure 48 - Student Transition Survey (2011) –UoB Student Experience Factors - differences between the experiences of non-doubters and doubters NB (*=Questions not asked in 2009)

Working hard at my studies is important to me * — Non-doubters: 78.0%, Doubters: 66.7%

The feedback I have received about my work has been useful — Non-doubters: 39.9%, Doubters: 45.1%

My tutors are accessible — Non-doubters: 59.9%, Doubters: 43.2%

My course is friendly * — Non-doubters: 56.3%, Doubters: 32.1%

I have enthusiastic lecturers — Non-doubters: 61.2%, Doubters: 45.7%

I have an enjoyable social life at University — Non-doubters: 48.5%, Doubters: 30.1%

I find my course interesting — Non-doubters: 78.0%, Doubters: 66.6%

I feel I belong/ 'fit in' * — Non-doubters: 64.7%, Doubters: 33.4%

I feel confident I can cope with my coursework — Non-doubters: 69.0%, Doubters: 45.7%

Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals — Non-doubters: 88.8%, Doubters: 77.8%

Legend: Non-doubters (red), Doubters (blue)

Confidence and student doubting/ destinations (NTU 2009)

At NTU, a Cramer's V test was applied to the 17 Student Experience Factors (for all 656 respondents) to see whether there was an association between these variables and doubting. The Student Experience Factor with the strongest association with doubting is 'I feel confident that I can cope with my studies'.

This table illustrates the strength of association between these factors and doubting in order of strongest association first (the top five have been highlighted).

NTU Student Transition Survey data (2009)

| Cramer's V	Agree/Disagree
I feel confident that I can cope with my coursework	**0.42**
My subject is interesting	**0.318**
I feel valued by teaching staff	**0.316**
I am confident that I will have enough money to complete my course	**0.315**
My taught sessions (such as lectures, seminars) are interesting	**0.269**
The assessment on my course is what I expected it to be	0.267
Lecturers are accessible	0.263
I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course	0.26
The feedback I receive about my work is useful	0.233
My course is well organized	0.229
Completing my degree will help me achieve future goals (eg career)	0.217
I have an enjoyable social life	0.215
My family is supportive	0.213
My fellow students are supportive	0.209
I would know where to go within the university if I had a problem	0.196
I like the house/flat/halls that I am living in	0.182
I have easy access to University resources (e.g. computers, library books that I need)	0.135

A box plot (below) illustrates the relationship between the statement 'I feel confident that I can cope' and the impact upon the continuation of students within the sample. Therefore, this relates to the smaller NTU sample that gave us permission to monitor their destinations (n=370).

Relationship between the statement 'I feel confident that I can cope' and the impact upon the destination of students within the sample, NTU 2009, (n=370)
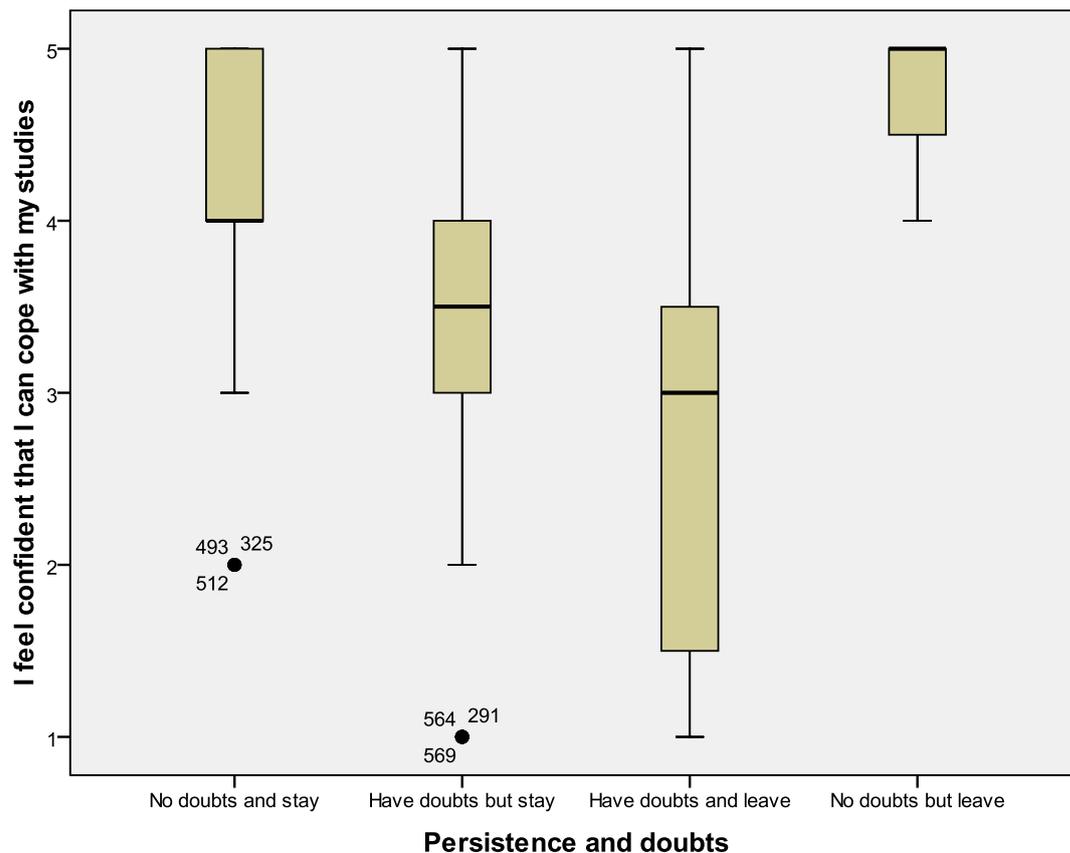
Factor analysis

The factor analysis that was conducted on the 17 Student Experience Factors on the larger data set at NTU separated the Factors into the three sets of variables as follows.

A. Academic Experience Variables

1. My subject is interesting

2. My course is well organised

3. I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course

4. My taught sessions (such as lectures and seminars) are interesting

5. Lecturers are accessible

6. I feel valued by teaching staff

7. The assessment on my course is what I expected it to be

8. The feedback I receive about my work is useful

9. I feel confident that I can cope with my studies

B. Support, Resources and Future Goals

10. My fellow students are supportive

11. My family is supportive

12. I have easy access to University resources (e.g. Computers, library books that I need)

17. Completing my degree will help me achieve my future goals

C. Student Lifestyle

14. I like the house/ flat/ halls that I am living in

15. I have an enjoyable social life

16. I am confident that I will have enough money to cope

Item 13. "I would know where to go within the University if I had a problem" did not fit in well with other factors and is therefore not included as part of any further factor analysis.

Testing the impact of the three variables on retention (NTU December 2009)

Box plots were created to illustrate patterns between students' destinations and their factor analysis scores.

A pattern emerges for factor A Academic Experience:

- Students with no-doubts who continued have a higher score than doubters who stay.
- In turn, doubters who stay have a higher academic experience score than doubters who leave.
- Therefore doubters who leave have the lowest score of all

As is often the case with the analysis of individual factors, we note that non-doubters who leave actually have a very high level of satisfaction. However, we are only dealing with very small numbers of students (4 at NTU) and so have not particularly focused on these sets of answers.

If we discount the small number of non-doubters who withdrew, a trend emerges.

Dissatisfaction with the academic experience is associated with doubting. Therefore, the more dissatisfied a student is with the experience, the more likely they are to have doubts and to leave early. Scoring lowly in these factors is therefore fairly useful as a predictor for doubting.

Factor A - Academic Experience box plot (NTU 2009)
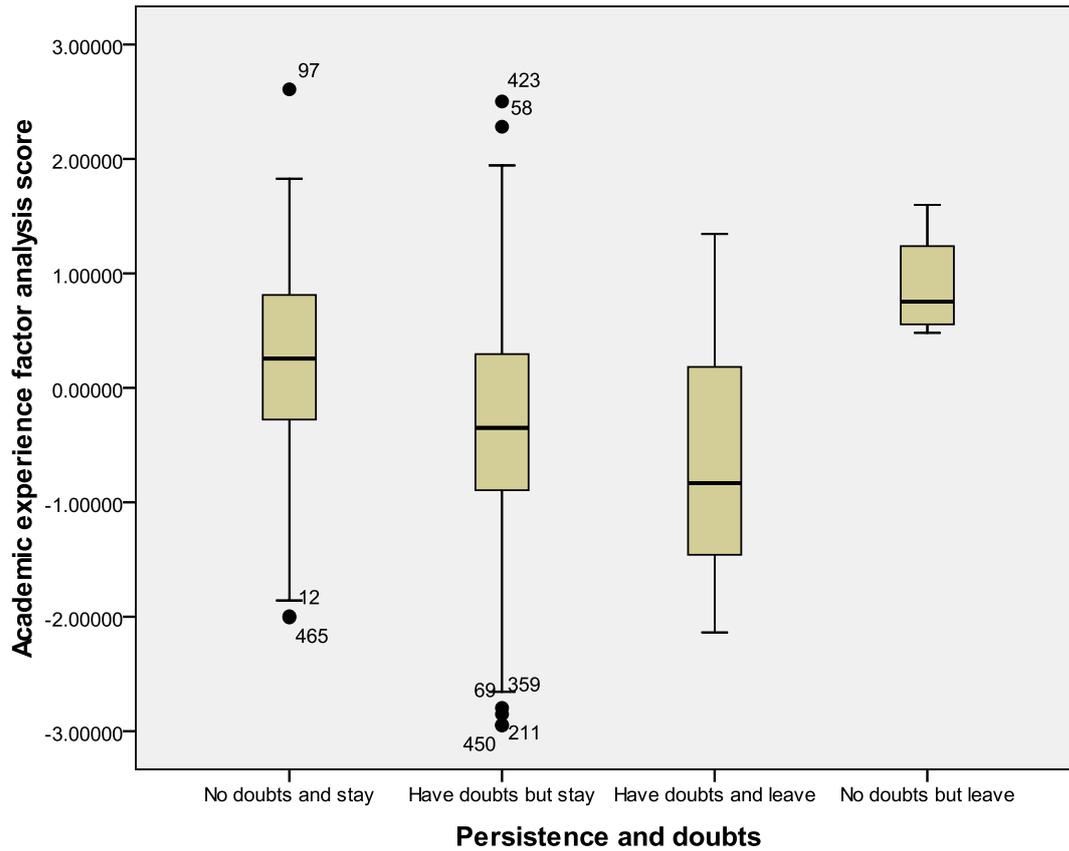
However this was not the case for the other two factors: B. Support, Resources and Future Goals and C. Student Lifestyle (see Appendix 4 for further details) .

Finding d) Students usually had more than one reason for doubting

As this table illustrates, there was often more than one reason for students to consider withdrawal.

Figure 49 - Student Transition Survey (2011) – all institutions Number of reasons given for considering withdrawal

	NTU	BU	UoB
Number of students who said that they had considered withdrawing from university	145	54	81
Number of responses ticked in response to 'Please tell us what made you consider leaving' (tick all that apply).	332	103	150
Total respondents = 280			
Total reasons cited by respondents = 685 = 2.1 reasons per respondent			

Note – not all students answered all questions – so figures may differ from overall respondents.

Finding e) The primary reasons for doubting were associated with the students' experience of the programme

The tables associated with this finding are located in 13e.

Finding f) There were four main reasons cited by doubters for staying

The tables associated with this finding are located in 13f.

Finding g) The primary times for considering leaving were immediately before and after Christmas

The following provides further details about how the reasons for doubting appear to change at different times of the year.

University of Bradford

Student Transition Survey (2011) - UoB Timing of doubt: Most important reason to consider leaving

NB: Numbers for doubts 'Before I arrived' and 'Induction' were felt to be too small for further analysis.

Doubts in the first term

1. Problem associated with course (26.2%)
2. Student lifestyle (21.4%)
3. Personal problems (19.0%)
4. Finance and doubts over course helping with future goals (both 14.3%)
5. Homesick (4.8%)

Doubts after Christmas

1. Doubts over course helping with future goals (26.5%)
2. Problems associated with the course (23.5%)
3. Student Lifestyle and Finance (both 17.6%)
4. Personal Problems (11.8%)
5. Homesick and Other (both 2.9%)

Doubts Now (Feb-April)

1. Problem associated with the course (44.4%)
2. Student Lifestyle (22.2%)
3. Doubts over course helping with future goals (16.7%)
4. Personal problems, Finance , Homesick and Other (all 5.6%)

Nottingham Trent University

Student Transition Survey (2011) - NTU Timing of doubt: Most important reason to consider leaving

NB: Numbers for doubts 'Before I arrived' (6 students) and 'Welcome Week' 8 students) were felt to be too small for further analysis.

Doubts in the first term

1. Problem associated with course (20.5%)
2. Doubts over course helping with future goals and Other (both 16.7%)
3. Student lifestyle (15.4%)
4. Homesick (14.1%)
5. Finance (9.0%)
6. Personal Problems (7.7%)

Doubts after Christmas

1. Problems associated with the course (21.4%)
2. Student Lifestyle (both 19.0%)
3. Personal Problems and Other (both 17.9%)
4. Doubts over course helping future goals (13.1%)
5. Finance (6.0%)
6. Homesick (4.8%)

Doubts Now (Feb-April)

1. Problems associated with the course (41.9%)
2. Other (19.4%)
3. Doubts over course helping with future goals (12.9%)
4. Student Lifestyle and Personal Problems (both 9.7%)
5. Finance (6.5%)
6. Homesickness (is at zero)

Bournemouth University

Student Transition Survey (2011) - BU Timing of doubt: Most important reason to consider leaving

NB: Numbers for doubts 'Before I arrived' and 'Induction' were felt to be too small for further analysis.

Doubts in the first term

1. Problems associated with course (35.7%)
2. Student lifestyle (17.9%)
3. Homesick (14.3%)
4. Doubts over course helping with future goals and Other (both 10.7%)
5. Finance (7.1%)
6. Personal Problems (3.6%)

Doubts after Christmas

1. Problems associated with the course (45.5%)
2. Doubts over course helping with future goals (18.2%)
3. Student Lifestyle (15.2%)
4. Personal Problems (9.1%)
5. Other (6.1%)
6. Finance and Homesick (both 3.0%)

Doubts Now (Feb-April)

1. Problems associated with the course (52.6%)
2. Doubts over course helping with future goals (21.1%)
3. Student Lifestyle (15.8%)
4. Personal problems and Other (both 5.3%)

Note - where a reason doesn't appear it is because no-one selected it.

Finding h) Students reported different degrees of doubting

### Figure 50 - Doubting & intentions and student persistence (tested December 2009) - all institutions

Student Transition Survey (2009) Impact of the degree of doubting on progression	NTU	BU	UoB
Continuation rates for non-doubters (for comparison purposes) (n=301)	98%	97%	100%
Have you considered withdrawing at any point during the first year?			
Yes and decided to stay (n=141)	101	22	18
Continued to year 2 (n=133)	96	21	16
Continued to year 2 percentage (average = 95%)	95%	95%	89%
Did not continue to year 2 (n=8)	5	1	2
Did not continue to year 2 percentage (average = 5%)	5%	5%	11%
Yes and not made my mind up (n=36)	29	3	
Continued to year 2 (n=29)	25	2	2
Continued to year 2 percentage (average = 80%)	84%	66%	50%
Did not continue to year 2 (n=7)	4	1	2
Did not continue to year 2 percentage (average = 20%)	16%	34%	50%
Yes and decided to leave (n=7)	6	0	1
Continued to year 2 (n =4)	3	0	1 (100%)
Continued to year 2 percentage (average = 57%)	50%	0	

Did not continue to year 2 (n=3)	3	0	
Did not continue year 2 percentage (43%)	50%	0	0%

In the 2009 student transition survey, the largest number of doubters had expressed doubts, but decided to stay. Only a small number had decided to definitely withdraw, even if ultimately only half of them did so.

The 2011 survey explored how seriously students rated their level of doubting (see figure 51 below). Students were asked to rate the strength of their doubts from 1 (a little) to 5 (very much). At Bradford and Bournemouth students were more likely to have serious doubts (4 or a 5). However, this was not the case at NTU, which saw the most common rating of the seriousness of doubting as "a little" (24%).

Figure 51 - Student Transition Survey (2011) - all institutions How seriously have you considered withdrawing? (n=339)
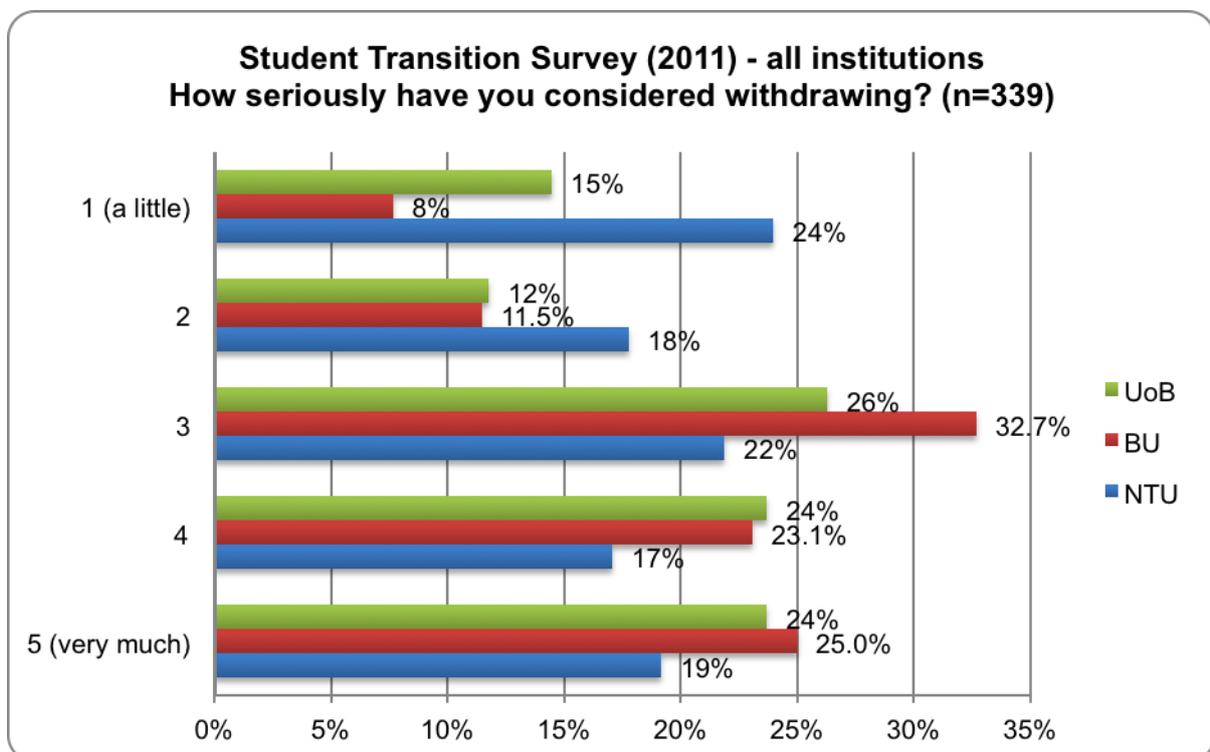
Importantly, the severity of doubting also appears to influence students' intentions. In 2011[25], 28% of all doubters had not made up their minds about whether to stay or not. However, when we looked at those with stronger doubts (4 – 5 out of 5), 42% had not yet made up their minds whether they were staying or not.

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[25] At the time of writing, the actual impact of strength of doubting had not been tested. This will be tested in December 2011.
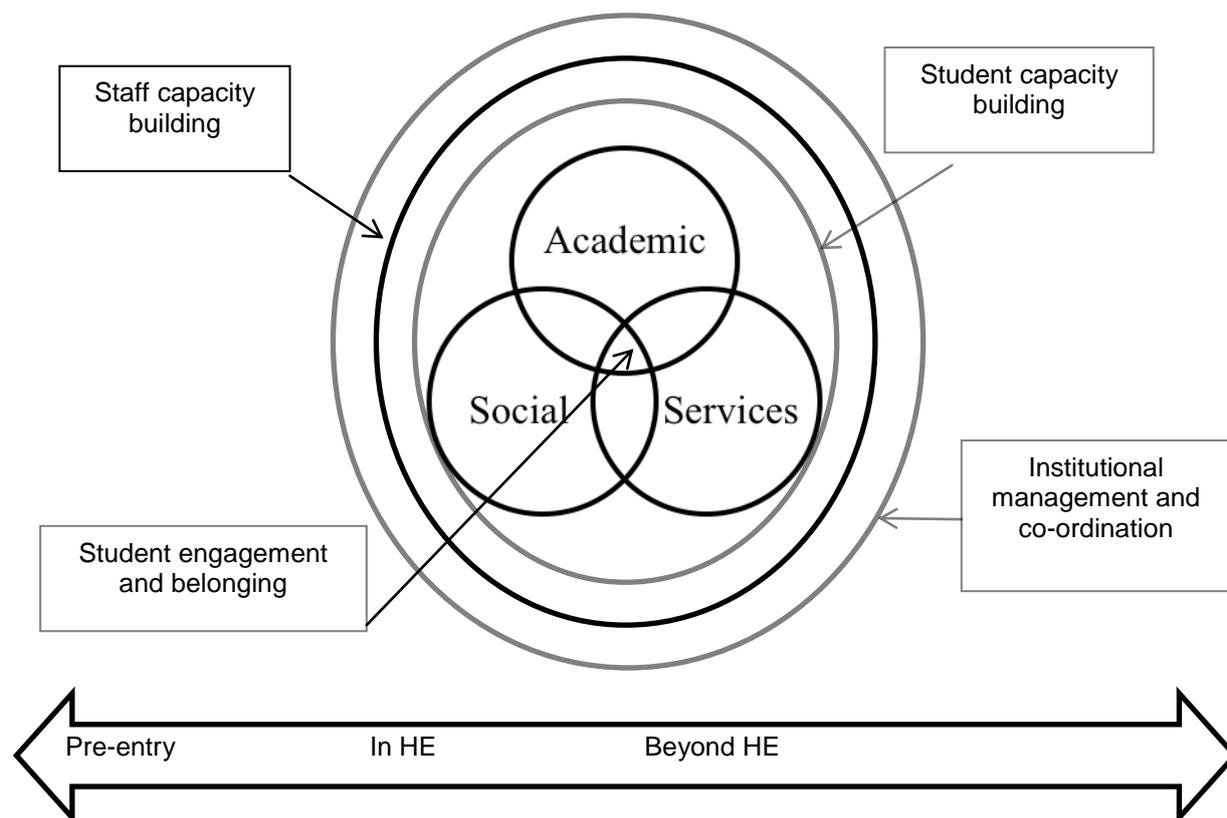
Finding i) Some student groups appear more likely to doubt than others

Details of the impact of demographics on the likelihood of doubting are provided in Appendix 8.

15: Findings of your evaluation evidence, mapped where possible against the 'What works?' conceptual model and outcomes of the programme

Conceptual model

Model Stages

	HERE Project Findings & Recommendations
Pre-entry	In our study relatively few students had doubts before arriving (finding g)

Recommendation 1) 'helping students to make the transition to HE' partially encompasses pre-entry work, see references to Stepping Stones 2HE

Recommendation 4) 'helping students to make more informed |

	decisions about course choice' is relevant to the pre-entry stage
In HE	Findings a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9 |
| Beyond HE | Finding f reports that one of the main reasons cited by doubters for staying relates to future goals

Recommendation 7) 'Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can help achieve their goals' encourages programme teams to help students consider how the course will help them beyond HE |

Spheres

Spheres of influence	HERE Project Findings & Recommendations
Academic	Finding c reports that student doubters are less satisfied with their university experience

Finding e reports that the main reasons for doubting are primarily academic in nature

Finding f notes that one of the main reasons cited by doubters for staying relates to adapting to the course

Finding g reports that the primary times for considering leaving appear to be around Christmas time, the time when students are submitting their first major block of coursework

All the recommendations relate in some way to the academic programme |
| Social | Finding f notes that support from friends and family is one of the |

	most important reasons cited by students for staying Recommendation 2 suggests that students value the personal relationships they have with staff Recommendation 5 offers suggestions for improving social relationships amongst students within the programme Recommendation 6 offers suggestions about improving the sense of belonging within the programme
Services	Recommendation 9 suggests that programmes ought to ensure that both students and staff are better aware of the support services available

Strategies

	HERE Project Findings and Recommendations
Staff capacity building	The HERE Project Findings and Recommendations are primarily written for staff at programme level to reflect and consider their own practice. We have developed the findings and recommendations into a toolkit for staff. The toolkit contains a more succinct version of the information contained within the report and a series of self-reflective questions for staff to use in team meetings or away days.
Student capacity building	Our focus has been to provide information for staff to enable them to more effectively engage students.
Student engagement	We recognise in finding c, that doubters are report being less satisfied with many of the factors associated with student

and belonging	engagement. In recommendation 1, we suggest students are given support to engage more effectively with the curriculum, suggesting that induction, feedback and peer support will help. In recommendation 2, we suggest that improving the communication and relationships with staff can help. In recommendation 6, we offer suggestions about improving a sense of belonging by improving relationships amongst peers and tutors, and activities to develop a sense of community within the programme. In recommendation 8, we offer suggestions about ways to help students to engage, these include interesting learning and teaching activities and interested and engaged staff.
Institutional management and co-ordination	Most of our focus has been tightly on the interactions taking place within the first year of the programme. As doubting appears so strongly associated with students' experiences of the programme, this appears to be justified. We therefore recommend that institutions prioritise and support the teaching of first year students, particularly helping them to develop the skills, confidence and sense of identity required to become effective learners at university.

16: Implications and recommendations for policy and practice at different levels within the institution and beyond, different disciplines and for specific target groups of students

Higher Education has undergone a series of significant changes in the past 20 years (Education Act, 1992; Dearing Report, (NCIHE 1997); Roberts Report, 2003; Leitch Report, 2006; Browne Report, 2010). Perhaps most significantly, student numbers have dramatically increased and funding per student has tended to decrease. Whittaker 2008) argues that this 'massification' (Scott, 1995) can lead to depersonalisation. Furthermore, the introduction of higher fees paid directly by the students (even if repayment is deferred) has created a more customer-oriented shift with students expecting high quality services delivered quickly and efficiently to them (HEPI, 2009).

These elements create an environment where students have high expectations as consumers, are often unclear of the expectations upon them and can feel isolated within their new environment. There is a risk that students will struggle to engage with the curriculum, their peers and the institution and so fail to make the transition to being effective learners. Our research suggests that all students would benefit from support to help them engage with the curriculum and support to feel part of the course and university community, particularly in the first year.

Therefore, the HERE Project concentrated upon the needs of first year students[26]. We focussed especially upon the impact that doubting has on retention. Ultimately, doubters are more likely to withdraw from university than non-doubters. Moreover, they also report a less satisfactory experience, so the HERE Project findings are not just about retention, but also engagement and a positive learning and teaching experience too. Our experience suggests that, fundamentally, university learning,

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[26] We have made a number of recommendations throughout section 13

teaching and support services are of high quality, however it appears that some of the underlying assumptions of how these services are offered may not be particularly helpful for student doubters. For example, doubters appear to feel less valued or known by tutors, and so actively seeking out appointments with academic staff to ask for help may be harder for them to do. Of course students ought to take responsibility for their own issues and concerns, but we suggest that early in the first year, institutions ought to focus efforts on creating an environment in which all students can feel comfortable seeking out help.

Some groups of students are more likely to have doubts than others, for example, female students and students with disabilities. However, we have found that, in line with previous studies, around 1/3 of all students have doubts sufficiently strong to consider leaving. Whilst these student groups may need additional help engaging with the curriculum and the university community, we would also suggest that programme teams explore strategies to better engage all new students.

For the most part it appears that non-doubting students appear to better understand the higher education system and have the confidence to navigate their way through the support mechanisms on offer. Doubters, on the other hand appear to be less engaged with the academic and social processes and less enmeshed within the university communities. We therefore believe that programme teams can help doubters to engage more fully by designing the curriculum to maximise opportunities for students to engage, to feel that they belong and to develop meaningful relationships with one another and with teaching staff. This is resource intensive and will require institutions to prioritise teaching first years, an area of work that has not always been seen as high status.

The findings from the HERE project have far-reaching implications for policy and practice across the sector. One of the most significant aspects of our findings is that they have striking similarities across our three quite different geographical and demographic contexts and a range of disciplines. We are therefore confident that our findings and recommendations can be confidently applied across the sector.

17: Practical outputs and tools for use by other institutions

The HERE Project team has produced a number of resources for colleagues including publications and a toolkit for programme teams to use to reflect upon their own practices.

HERE Project Toolkit

The HERE Project Toolkit is a resource for programme teams to use to self-audit their own performance against the 9 toolkit areas. It is intended to be used as part of staff development or team meetings. The toolkit encourages the teams to reflect on their current practices and suggests actions for improving practice.

www.hereproject.org.uk

Publications

The HERE team have produced the following chapters:

Foster, E., Lawther, S., Lefever, R., Bates, N., Keenan, C. and Colley, B., 2011. HERE to Stay: an exploration of student doubting, engagement and retention in three UK universities. *In:* I. SOLOMONIDES, A. REID and P. PETOCZ, eds., *Engaging with Learning in Higher Education.* Libri Publishing, 2011

Foster, E., Lawther, S. and McNeil, J., 2011. Learning Developers Supporting Early Student Transition. *In:* P. HARTLEY, J. HILSDON, C. KEENAN, S. SINFIELD and M. VERITY, eds., *Learning Development in Higher Education.* Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

Foster, E., and Lefever, R., forthcoming. Barriers and strategies for retaining male students. *In:* L. Thomas, and J. Berry, eds., *Male Access & Success: a discussion paper.* UK: Higher Education Academy, [forthcoming]

Online resources

A selection of presentations and resources are also available on the project website at www.hereproject.org.uk

18: Conclusions

The HERE Project set out to explore two factors associated with student retention and success:

- **Strand 1 - What impact does doubting have on subsequent retention?**
- **Strand 2 - What impact can programme teams have on retention?**
-

We believe that the HERE project significantly moves forward the sector's knowledge about student retention and success.

Firstly, most student retention research in the UK has been conducted after students have withdrawn (Yorke & Longden 2004, 2008). The research tends to suggest that withdrawal is due to a combination of factors, but that dissatisfaction with the course, poor initial choice of course and social factors are frequently the most commonly cited reasons. The HERE Project looked at why students doubted during their time at university. Our findings suggest that the reasons for doubting are fundamentally the same as those cited as reasons for leaving early in post-withdrawal studies. Students have doubts primarily due to their experience of the programme and the social environment. We believe this is useful as it suggests that the reasons cited in post-withdrawal studies are not simply post hoc rationalisations, but consistent patterns of thought. Furthermore students often have more than one reason to doubt and they appear to have doubts over a sustained period of time. This appears to give credence to the work of Ozga & Sukhnandan's (2008) model: namely students withdraw due to an accumulation of problems and dissatisfactions, not due to a sudden crisis. There may be crises that lead to withdrawal, but our evidence suggests that doubters are already semi-detached from the course and so are less able to deal robustly with them when they occur. This finding appears to be similar to that of Castles (2004).

Doubting does influence withdrawal, however as there are far more doubters than

leavers, there is the potential for institutions to draw students back from the brink. Our 2009 survey asked doubters to report their intentions, unfortunately not the strength of doubting[27], those student doubters who had doubted, but decided to remain, had a progression pattern similar to those who had not doubted at all. Even amongst those doubters who had decided to withdraw, 50% actually continued.

Something went right for these students and helped them remain.

Our research suggests that the factors associated with retention varied between institution and over time. Four factors did appear to be particularly important. The first factor was 'support from friends and family', the second, was 'determination/ internal factors', the third, the extent to which students perceived that the programme would help them 'achieve their future goals' and the fourth, 'adapting to the course/university'. Student feedback about the role of friendship has been particularly complex: students do not appear to particularly value its importance, despite the frequency that it is mentioned as a reason to stay.

The work also appears to mirror some key aspects of Tinto's work on retention (1993). In Tinto's model, student integration in both the academic and social spheres influences the decision to withdraw, as does each student's goals and aspirations. In our study, students doubt for primarily academic reasons and social factors appear important reasons to remain, furthermore, student goals appeared to be one of the most important reasons to stay. Student engagement (Kuh et al (2008), Bryson, Cooper & Hardy (2010) appears particularly important as a factor associated with doubting. In our studies, students who do not appear to have doubts appear to be far more integrated into the institutional milieu, both academically and socially. They appear to have been better able to interpret the messages provided by the institution and appear better able to make sense of the academic environment.

It appears that the focal point of student doubts is the academic programme. It also appears to us that the programme is also the primary place where retention ought to be tackled. Our studies showed that students were dissatisfied with other aspects of

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[27] We asked about strength of doubting in 2011, and will monitor its impact on retention after the end of the HERE Project.

their student life, such as accommodation or location, but these factors were less important than academic factors. Similarly, in our large student surveys, support offered by student and academic support services appeared to be less important than support and engagement offered within the programme, although when interviewed, doubters were highly appreciative of such professional support.

Ultimately, doubting is an important piece in the retention puzzle. Doubters are more likely to leave early than non-doubters and are less satisfied with the university experience. However, in this study we have found numerous factors that have helped doubters to stay on course. We would suggest that the programme is the pivot point around which retention problems and solutions circulate. Programme teams clearly can reduce the likelihood of students leaving early. This can be done by engaging effectively with students from the outset, helping them adapt to becoming effective university students and supporting them through creating cohesive, socially-engaging programme environments.

As a postscript, it is interesting to note that when the HERE Project researchers interviewed course teams, programme staff found the experience to be a valuable opportunity to reflect upon their own practices. It led them to consider strategies for consolidating and improving the way that they worked with first year students. Furthermore, several have expressed interest in participating in the post-project dissemination and would like to use the HERE Project Toolkit as part of their team developmental activities.

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