



Final report

Comparing and evaluating the impacts on student retention of different approaches to supporting students through study advice and personal development

Project partners:

University of Reading and Oxford Brookes University

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What Works? Student Retention & Success



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Executive summary

This reports details the findings of a project which has predominately examined two distinct approaches to supporting students at two different higher education institutions conducted over a three year period between 2008/2011. The focus of this investigation is the experience of first year undergraduate students within the contexts of an academic school (Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes University) in the first instance and across an entire institution (University of Reading) in the second. The study looked at the Personal and Academic Support System (PASS) at Oxford Brookes that is comprised of three strands: the PASS tutorial, re-sit support provided through PASS and the systematic incidence of PASS interventions, all with an underpinning pastoral referral facility that provides integrated and holistic support to students. At Reading, the investigation concentrated on a holistic model of student support and development comprised of two key elements: the newly configured one-

stop shop for student services and the university-wide system of personal tutoring. To enhance the contribution of this project to the 'what works' for students programme, we also established a cluster group network of nine higher education institutions to facilitate further research and dissemination of good practice.

Method

Given the nature of this project, the research methods used to generate data varied across both institutions. Reading focused on data which was gathered specifically for the purpose of this project while Oxford Brookes focused on PASS as a particular and unique intervention in use since 2005 and therefore had access to additional data on student entry qualifications and preparedness for university. These data were used, together with information gathered via surveys, focus groups and interviews with students and staff, to evaluate the effectiveness of PASS in supporting students. In addition to issuing surveys to whole-year cohorts, Reading took a narrative approach and gathered longitudinal data from a small sample of students who agreed to provide more in-depth information regarding their student journeys and progress over the course of their programme of study. However, it is important to note that conclusions were predominantly drawn from a shared methodology including focus group and interview data from students and staff and survey data gathered from students at both universities.

Findings

Our findings indicate that support provided by the institution plays a key role in ensuring students' progress and a more positive student experience overall. Our key findings show that providing structured support, fostering engagement, managing expectations, enabling a sense of belonging are all central in helping institutions to retain their students. We have found that:

- Students are more likely to engage with the study support and personal development available from the institution if they are easily accessible and students feel there is a reason to engage.

- The building of relationships, particularly between Personal Tutors and their tutees helps retain students.
- Staff members who operate as Personal Tutors want to feel valued in the role and rewarded for it.
- Holistic models of study advice and personal development are effective in making students feel they are supported towards success, whether these models are delivered across the university (Reading) or locally in an academic school (Oxford Brookes).

Recommendations

- We recommend PASS as a holistic model of support which could be transferred to different contexts. We suggest colleagues look at the elements of PASS and consider which might work best within their context.
- We recommend that all support for students is easy for them to access in terms of physical access, ease of referral from others, ease of knowing who is available to help, transparent guidelines and boundaries and in terms of promotion and marketing information.
- We recommend contextualised study advice. The context could be school-based (as at Oxford Brookes) or centrally delivered but focused on the academic discipline (as at Reading).
- We recommend that Personal Tutors receive more support from their institutions in terms of training and guidance materials, but also in terms of reward and recognition.
- We recommend a one-stop shop approach to delivering student services on campus and via a physical and virtual helpdesk.

Conclusions

Both institutions are committed to converting what we know about what works for students in terms of retention and progression into practical support for them. These commitments include:

- Updating the Personal Tutor's Handbook online and in print to include data and outputs from this project (Reading).
- Additional staff development sessions tailored to personal tutoring and student support will be developed and offered. This will include a new drop-in session for the PG Certification in Academic Practice for all new lecturers (Reading).
- The one-stop shop intends to collect and analyse more data for comparative purposes (Reading).
- If possible, to run a follow on seminar on personal tutoring in 2011/12 to build upon the work of the seminar held in 2010 (Reading and Oxford Brookes).
- Maintain the Cluster Group network as far as is practicable, with the intention of ongoing collaboration looking at the areas of retention and success and student support and development (Reading and Oxford Brookes).
- Papers have been requested, are being drafted, and will be submitted to the Sub Committees for Student Development and Student Support at Reading at the start of academic session 2011/12. This will ensure that the findings of the project are disseminated widely and effectively.
- A paper is also being drafted for the Sub Committee on the Delivery and Enhancement of Learning and Teaching at Reading. This paper will focus on how Personal Tutors perceive the role, in terms of reward and recognition. It will contain a number of recommendations for further enhancement of practice at Reading, including:
 - Developing a new, competitive award for Personal Tutors; to recognise and reward excellence. This suggestion is supported by the PVC Learning and Teaching.

What works? 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.

Abstract

The aim of this collaborative project between the University of Reading and Oxford Brookes University is to compare and evaluate the impact on retention of different approaches to supporting undergraduate students through a range of academic and pastoral support systems. Both institutions took a different approach to evaluate what works to ensure student progression. At Reading the investigation focussed on a university wide Student Services provision located in a one-stop shop and the personal tutorial system designed to encourage and maintain student well being and enhance academic development. At Oxford Brookes the investigation focussed on evaluating an existing system of student support, the Personal and Academic Support System (PASS) exclusively implemented within the School of Life Sciences.

Data for this project were gathered institutionally at Reading and within the School of Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes. A mixed methods approach was taken with Reading focussing predominately on qualitative data supplemented with survey findings and institutional data and Oxford Brookes taking a more fixed approach within Life Sciences including survey and interview data. Qualitative findings were

analysed from an interpretive perspective with Reading focussing on a narrative approach while Oxford Brookes focussed on statistical analysis. Findings reveal that in order for students to be successful in their studies certain key elements need to be in place. These include reciprocal student and staff engagement, relationship building with peers, academic staff and support staff, and personal tutoring plays a critical role in pastoral care and academic development of undergraduate students.

This project also invited practitioners from seven other institutions to work with Reading and Oxford Brookes to contribute to the body of knowledge on good practice. The findings from the project and these fellowships imply that institutions need to take note that students require support from a range of people institutionally, including support staff, personal tutors, peers and academics. The support which promotes student development and success needs to be available, accessible, consistent and seen to be maintained by the institution.

Primary evaluation topics

In evaluating what works in terms of student retention and success, this project focused on:

- Personal tutoring – university-wide at Reading and locally as part of PASS in the School of Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes;
- Study and academic skills support – through personal tutorials and the one-stop shop at Reading and via PASS in the School of Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes;
- Centrally provided student services via the one-stop shop at Reading.

To supplement this we also monitored what works to retain students in the School of Law and the School of Systems Engineering at Reading which are presented as individual case studies.

Project aims and objectives

The aim of this project is to compare and evaluate the impact on student retention of different approaches to supporting students through academic and pastoral support systems. By different we mean different in terms of how the support is delivered (locally at Oxford Brookes and centrally at Reading) and also in terms of how and why it was developed, e.g. to address identified needs and issues at Oxford Brookes and as part of the institution-wide offering at Reading. The approach at Reading is seen as pervasive/optional and at Oxford Brookes as interventionist for reasons outlined below:

- The University of Reading undertook to investigate a university-wide approach focusing on the support students receive through a Student Services one-stop shop located in a central location (Carrington Building), and a university-wide system of personal tutoring designed in part to support student progression. The two are inextricably linked in terms of cross referral and being promoted as a holistic support package at Reading.
- Within the School of Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes a specific and existing Personal and Academic Support System (PASS) was investigated and evaluated. PASS is a holistic system of student support delivered in the School of Life Sciences which included identification of students at risk of failure, monitoring their progress and intervening to ensure their success.

To meet these aims, the project undertook the following objectives:

- To evaluate the effectiveness of PASS at Oxford Brookes and the holistic package of support for students at Reading, i.e. to show what works for students, particularly focusing on students in their first year of study.
- To provide institutional information about the specific interventions, together with supporting evidence of their perceived impact on student progression,

success and consequently on student retention, and to share these within and outside of our own institutional contexts, i.e. to show what works for our institutions and for the sector.

Institutional context

Institutional profiles

The University of Reading has a diverse student profile. The total student population is approximately 17,700. 34% of total students are international students from 150 countries. 53% are undergraduates and 66% study full time. Of young full time undergraduate entrants, 83.8% were from State schools and colleges and 10% of the total student population come from Berkshire. Most recent HESA figures show that of young first degree students, 93.4% of 2008/9 students continued. This is an improvement from 92.5% of 2007/8 students and 93% of 2006/7 students.

Oxford Brookes became a university in 1992 and is classed as a modern university. There are about 18,800 students studying in eight academic Schools of whom about 13,500 are undergraduates. Life Sciences is the smallest School at Oxford Brookes, with 650 undergraduate students enrolled on 16 degree fields in disciplines such as Biomedical Sciences, Molecular Biology, Human Biosciences, Nutrition, Exercise Science, Environmental Science and Environmental Management. There are 100 postgraduate students, 60 of whom are studying nine taught Masters programmes and 40 are research students studying for PhDs. The Key Performance Indicator (KPI) figure for retention of 2009/10 entrants in their first year is 92.4%. This matches the HESA definition (full time undergraduates on course longer than 12 months). If you look at the retention of all 2009/10 entrants (including full time, part time, postgraduate etc.) the figure is 90.1% for the whole institution.

Institutional backgrounds in terms of retention

The main reason for Reading's inclusion in this retention project programme was that traditionally, it does not have a problem with its retention of students.

For example:

- 92% of all students who started in part one in 2006/7 continued to part two in 2007/8
- 91.6% of all students who started in part one in 2007/8 continued to part two in 2008/9
- 92.6% of all students who started in part one in 2008/9 continued to part two in 2009/10

Whilst Reading has always been proud of the fact that students appear to wish to remain and continue their studies, members of the Senior Management Team felt that it would be beneficial to try to gather some data as to why this was the case. Reading was keen to share with the sector the reasons for success in this area and to take the opportunity to investigate, and hopefully identify, the key elements behind its strong performance. Putting together a collaborative bid with Oxford Brookes University appeared to provide a timely and useful mechanism for looking at the reasons behind the successful retention data at Reading. In the initial stages of the project, both institutions were using different methods to identify students who may be at risk of non-completion. As part of PASS, the Robbins Method, designed by Dr Susan Robbins investigates the issue of at risk of failure and/or withdrawal within the School of Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes, and as such is tailored to the needs of the School. The method of identifying at risk students used by Reading at the start of this project in 2008 was based on HEFCE criteria and a more general method of identifying those at risk of early withdrawal. During the course of this project the Senior Management Team at Reading felt that there was no longer a need to produce and examine the 'at risk' lists, as Schools were seen to be managing retention well at local level and there was no perceived university-wide problem.

During the lifespan of the project, the University of Reading made two significant moves in the area of retention. Firstly, it disbanded the Steering Group on Retention (2009) and devolved reporting information retention to other groups. The Management Information and Monitoring Group now receives the management

information and statistical data pertaining to retention, and two new Sub Committees on Student Development and Student Support receive and examine the information which is predominantly qualitative in nature. This was subsequent to a review of the main committees feeding into the University Teaching and Learning Committee and was seen as a way to rationalise the committee structure.

Secondly, the Planning Support Office decided in 2010 that it was no longer necessary to produce lists of students considered to be 'at risk' of withdrawing early (according to HEFCE identifiers). This decision was taken as the lists were not seen to be an effective way of identifying those students who did eventually go on to withdraw. This is not to say that Reading does not feel retention to be an important area on which to focus, rather it reflects the University's approach of trying to bring together aspects of student support by re-configuring the committee structure to focus on issues of student development and support. Both new Sub Committees have received updated reports from this project.

These developments at Reading, therefore, resulted in a project focus shift towards institutional support for student development through a student services one-stop shop and the well-established personal tutorial system for all undergraduate students.

Rationale for bringing together Reading and Oxford Brookes

Clearly, the two institutions and their respective systems could not be directly compared mainly because of their inherent differences in structure, institutional focus and student demographics. Rather, we sought to show the breadth and effectiveness of the approaches across our institutions in terms of supporting retention and student success. During initial discussions regarding the retention grants programme the project team quickly identified that we could gather data in areas that were at that point under-researched, and use it to offer practical solutions and outputs across the sector.

Background to personal tutoring and student support at Reading

Every undergraduate student who is enrolled at the University of Reading has a named Personal Tutor. This has been the case for many years and Reading is unlikely to change particularly given the current post-Browne Review context. The role of the Personal Tutor at Reading is a dual one; encompassing both academic development and pastoral care. Personal Tutors at Reading are part of a defined teaching and learning infrastructure (see Figure 1 below) which seeks to ensure that there is ongoing support for tutors as well as students. Creating a structure in which Senior Tutors and School Directors of Teaching and Learning (SDTL) work collaboratively on cases of neglect of work or ascertaining fitness to study, for example, ensures that support is embedded for staff as well as students. There is no limit set on the amount of tutees that can be allocated to each tutor although there is an expectation that workload will be adjusted accordingly for those tutors with a high number of tutees. The ratio of tutees to tutor varies widely between schools and departments, with some tutors having less than 10 tutees and some having in excess of 40.

Students are notified of and are expected to meet their tutor for the first time during Freshers' Week. Thereafter, meetings should occur at least once per term. Tutors must make tutees aware of office hours and sent out invitations as appropriate. It is made explicitly clear that there is responsibility on both parties to maintain the relationship and students will benefit if they invest time and commitment to their personal tutorial meetings.

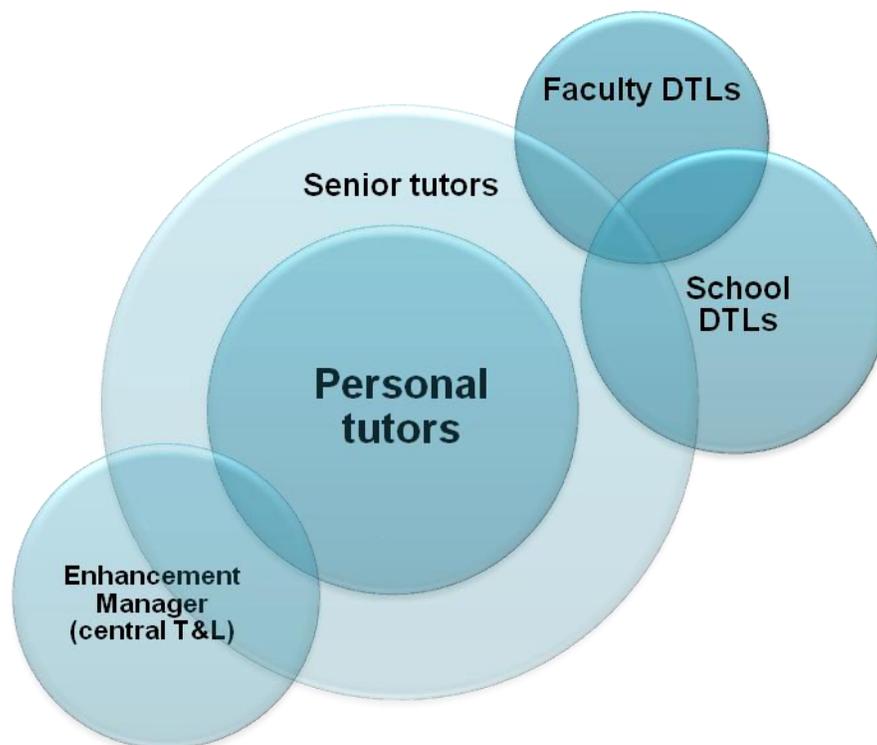


Figure 1: Context in which Personal Tutors operate at Reading.

School Directors of Teaching and Learning are supported by Faculty Level Directors of Teaching and Learning and there is a centrally situated Enhancement Manager within the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning who oversees the Personal Tutor System and coordinates the Senior Tutor Community of Practitioners.

The Personal Tutor is promoted as being the first point of contact for students who might be experiencing any academic difficulty but students are also made aware of

the centralised one stop-shop for Student Services and much cross-referral occurs between the two. There is flexibility as to whether tutorials are one-to-one or small group tutorials and many schools offer a mixed approach. As a rule, tutors do not allocate work to be completed.

Background to PASS personal tutoring at Oxford Brookes

At the end of the 2003/4 academic year, Life Sciences School management at Oxford Brookes realised that first year students were dropping out, particularly in semester one and following the Christmas vacation, and they did not know why this was happening. Action research with first year students during 2004/5 revealed that many had not met their Personal Tutor and did not know who to go to if they were having difficulties. A knock-on effect of the development of the University's online student management system was that students were no longer required to obtain signatures from their Personal Tutor for such things as adding or deleting modules from their programme. Having lost the imperative to meet their Personal Tutor (which before electronic management, had happened six times a year), students were not responding to requests from their tutor to meet up. Failure to establish a working relationship with at least one academic when things were going well meant that many students did not have the confidence to go to staff when things started to go wrong.

The PASS tutorial programme was first introduced into the School of Life Sciences in 2005/6 in order to restore the tutor-tutee relationship. PASS provides proactive personal tutoring through group tutorials for first year students with their Personal Tutor. The tutorial is used to deliver study skills training but importantly the students get to know their Personal Tutor and one another. Registers of student attendance are taken at tutorials and logged with staff feedback. A model of how the strands operationalised within the PASS structure fit together is presented below in Figure 2.

The PASS model in the School of Life Sciences, Oxford Brookes University

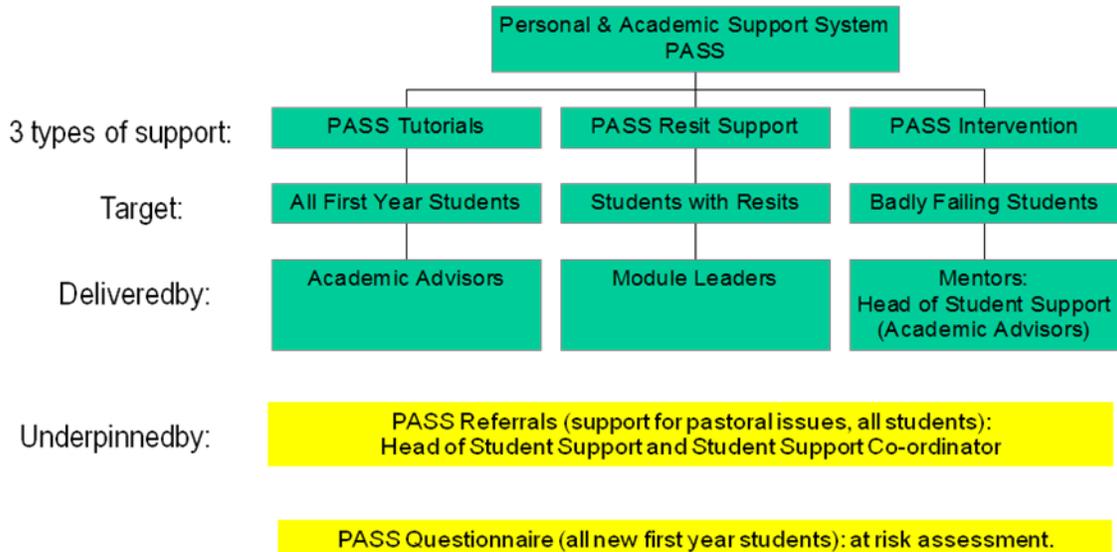


Figure 2: PASS Model in use at Oxford Brookes, Life Sciences

All academic staff members at Oxford Brookes have responsibilities as Personal Tutors for named students. During the course of this project Oxford Brookes revised its personal tutoring system across the University as follows:

- Personal Tutors were renamed ‘Academic Advisors’ and as this name suggests, they have a mainly academic role of monitoring their tutees’ progress and advising on module selection within the degree or course.
- Life Sciences’ Academic Advisors do more than those in other Schools in that they run the proactive tutoring programme of PASS tutorials, whereas Academic Advisors in other Schools work on a reactive basis, responding to students when they contact them but not having an organised programme of meetings.

- The University allocates two hours per tutee per annum to staff for their Academic Advising role. For Life Sciences staff, having eight first year tutees in a PASS tutorial group and eight one-hour group tutorials, the remaining eight hours are used for one-to-one reviews at the end of each semester. A new post of Student Support Coordinator (SSC) was introduced alongside the change to Academic Advisor¹. SSCs act as a first port of call for students seeking help with process issues: how to make programme changes; where to find information; signposting support and help.
- The SSC has a signposting role, directing students with personal or pastoral issues to the HSS and giving other assistance as appropriate. She keeps records of student attendance at PASS tutorials and chases up absentees. She logs student questionnaire data that is used to identify students needing extra support, such as those with dyslexia or other learning difficulties, English Second Language students who might need extra language support, etc.

In common with other HEIs, Oxford Brookes has a Directorate of Student Services that provides cross-university support for all students through self or staff referral.

PASS tutorials are embedded in a taught module 'Skills for Biosciences' that is compulsory for at least 95% (about 210) of first year Life Sciences' students. There are assessed tasks set and supported through PASS tutorials that contribute to module marks (30% of the assessment). All Personal Tutors are involved in supporting these assignments and assessing student work. Now in their sixth year, PASS tutorials are part of the culture in Life Sciences.

The PASS referral system underpins the PASS tutorial system. When students present to their Personal Tutor with life issues such as ill health of themselves or

¹ For the purposes of this report, the title 'Personal Tutor' instead of Academic Advisor is used throughout to enable alignment with similar roles at the University of Reading and to make this function more clearly understood and transposable for other HEIs.

family, financial problems, depression, bereavement, accommodation issues, child care difficulties, if the Personal Tutor is not comfortable addressing these then they refer the student to an academic with the role of School Head of Student Support (HSS), who invites the student to a meeting. Active listening skills are used to determine what is concerning the student (sometimes different from the issue presented to their Personal Tutor).

Together, the student and HSS work out a way forward. It may involve referral to Student Services or the Students' Union Advice Centre for specialist professional help, though often the student and HSS can work things through together. The HSS writes Medical Equivalent Certificates, mediates in difficult circumstances with other staff and represents the student's interests at Examination Boards.

In implementing life issues support it is important that students take responsibility for certain factors in their situations. Whenever possible the HSS encourages students to manage their support by making and keeping appointments with support agencies themselves, emphasising the importance of being reliable.

Collection and analysis of first year entry and progression data at Oxford Brookes – background information

Students arriving in the School of Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes University fill in a paper questionnaire about their previous educational experience and qualifications, self reported competencies in academic skills, disabilities and medical conditions (Appendix A: PASS Student Profile 2010). They also write a paragraph about their hopes and aspirations on starting university. This information is used to check that students with disabilities have registered with the Disability Service, English Second Language students asking for extra academic English register for a module that will improve their English literacy skills, and to provide entry data as a baseline to track student progression throughout their first year and beyond.

Entry Qualification Analysis

There has been concern over the years about the academic preparedness and science qualifications of students entering Life Sciences. There have been moves to allow students with high non-science A2 levels on to science degrees, however scientific disciplines have a body of knowledge and scientific methodology that is required for academic success in studying these subjects. The entry data from successive cohorts of Life Sciences students from 2005/6 onwards has allowed comparison between science, science-related and non-science entry qualifications and first year outcomes to be quantified (see Appendix B: Robbins Scoring Method).

Looking at the data for 479 students from three entry cohorts that have completed their studies, 71% finish their first year with a full complement of eight module credits. Of these, 98.6% went on to obtain a degree, the pass cohort in Figure 3.

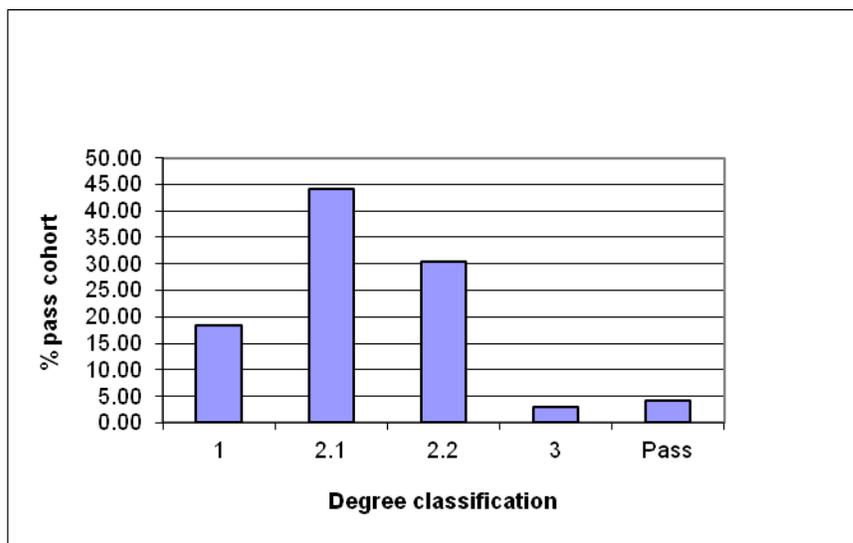


Figure 3: Degree outcomes for students who were successful in all their first year modules (N = 339)

29% finished their first year in deficit, failing one or more modules and needing to catch up over the next year or two. Of these students only two out of three left with a degree. One in three failed to graduate. Moreover, of those graduating, proportionally their class of degree was lower than for students who had been successful in their first year (Figure 4).

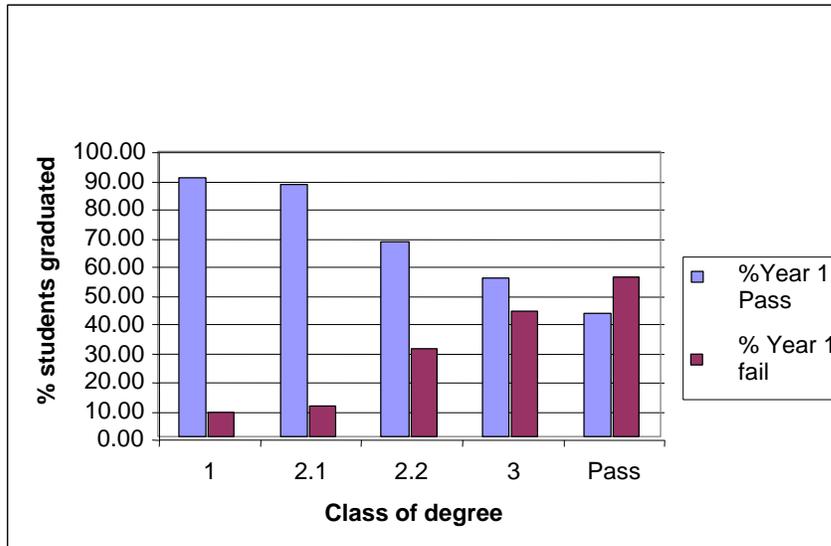


Figure 4: Degree classification by pass/fail eight first year modules

Evidence showed that students who had been successful in their first year of study were more likely to leave university with a good honours degree than students who had failed modules in their first year. Of those who had failed, one-third went on to become academic failures.

The question then arose: was there a pattern for those who failed first year modules? Science entry qualifications for all the students were logged using the Robbins scoring method to determine the science entry profile of the students who failed one or more modules in their first year using Robbins method band scores (Figure 5).

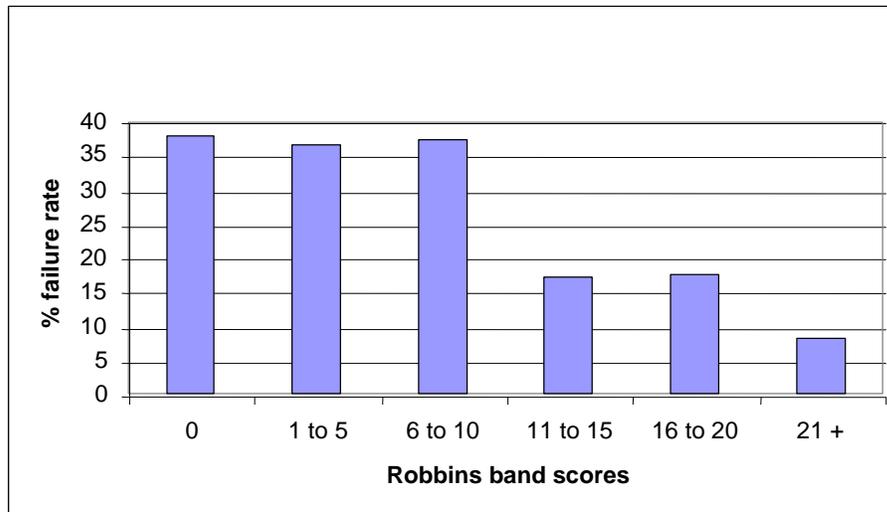


Figure 5: First year failure rate by Robbins band scores

The sharp drop from 38% failure rates to 17.5% failure rates occurred at the point where students had two science 1 and/or science 2 A levels (11+ points).

Of the 479 students monitored, 59% entered Life Sciences with science scores of 10 or lower (the first three bands that had a 38% failure rate). 41% of the students entering Life Sciences had science scores of 11 or more, equating to those with a 17.5% failure rate in Stage 1.

A 38% first year failure rate for students recruited without traditional science A levels, with the indication that one-third of students failing one or more modules in their first year left the university as academic failures, is a great cause for concern. It indicates the importance of academic preparedness for studying science degrees in terms of having a science vocabulary and knowledge base, and an understanding of scientific methodology. The message for recruitment is that students without traditional science qualifications would benefit from taking a science course before studying science at degree level. Table 1 below outlines the factors that come into play which impact on retaining students as a direct result to PASS interventions.

Table 1: Factors that may be making PASS retain students and the sources of evidence to test these.

Aspect of PASS	Feature	What might make PASS retain Ss?	Evidence
PASS Tutorials	Low staff:student ratio	Connection with a member of staff	<i>Focus groups</i> <i>Student survey</i> <i>Staff interviews</i>
		Connection with personal tutor specifically	
		Face to face contact	
		Early engagement	
		Having a named contact they see regularly and build a relationship with.	
	Compulsory: students chased up for non attendance	Like school - told what to do. Helps transition.	
		Someone notices whether they're there or not.	
Group tutorials, including groupwork	Connection with peers		
Study skills content	Academic preparedness. Introduction to a new culture.		
	Early skill building		
PASS Referrals	Provision of <i>Head of Student Support</i> role and <i>Student Support Co-ordinator</i> post in the School.	Students know they can turn to someone in the School who will be receptive re personal problems.	<i>Focus groups</i> <i>Student survey</i>
	Personal tutors do not need to deal with personal problems if they prefer not to.	Greater engagement in personal tutoring from staff who might not be suited to the personal side.	<i>Staff interviews</i>
PASS Intervention		One to one attention Early skill building Accountability	<i>Student interviews</i>

The one-stop shop at Reading (Carrington Building)

The Carrington Building was opened in 2007. Containing all the major student services (Disability, Careers, Counselling, Study Advice, Accommodation, Finance and Welfare) the building is built around a helpdesk, both physically and virtually. The physical Helpdesk is at the very heart of the building and students are directed here when they first enter the building. When the building opened the major promotion was regarding the Helpdesk, with the rationale being that if students could find the Helpdesk they would get the help they needed. As well as the physical Helpdesk, a virtual Helpdesk was launched. Students log into the Helpdesk via the student records system at Reading and can access well-researched FAQs as well as other useful information.

Another simple and effective feature of the Helpdesk is its contact telephone number - 5555. Feedback from sessions run by staff from the Helpdesk for Personal Tutors on the open staff development programme and as a part of the PGCAP at Reading indicates that staff appreciate the fact this number is easy to remember, and therefore easy to pass on to students. The fact that colleagues are aware of and can recall the Helpdesk number can be very reassuring, especially to those colleagues who are new to personal tutoring, or the University of Reading, or both.

Note on 'At risk' evaluation

At the start of the project, Reading and Oxford Brookes identified two cohorts of students, those at risk of early withdrawal and those not at risk. We did this to ascertain whether these students were indeed more likely to withdraw from university. At Reading, at risk lists were drawn up from the Planning Support Office based on HEFCE identifiers. At Oxford Brookes, a local method was used, the Robbins method. This was developed by Dr Sue Robbins, project lead at Oxford Brookes.

As mentioned previously, due to changes within the infrastructure and policy at the University of Reading, it was decided to shift the project focus from at risk students at Reading to looking at the experience of first years as a wider group. The Reading project team moved away from looking at students considered to be at risk of early withdrawal simply because close examination of the data seemed to suggest that these students were not the ones who left early and, on reflection, it was felt that spending any more time and energy on this task would not produce useful data for the project, the programme, or the sector (see Table 2 for summary data of part one withdrawals from Reading).

Table 2: Withdrawals of part one students up to March 2011*

Year of project	No of students identified as 'at risk'	No of students withdrawn
2008-9	214	14
2009-10	180	8
2010-11	152	3

*not including suspended to re-enter or failures

Methodology

To meet the aims and objectives of this collaborative project, we adopted a mixed method research strategy, with differing processes to generate data in line with the tenets of evaluation research which incorporate flexible and fixed research designs (Robson, 2002). Our methodology and approach which includes student focus groups, questionnaires/surveys and interviews with undergraduate students and members of staff were given ethical clearance and the practical application of these methods began during the academic year 2008/2009. Both institutions gathered qualitative and quantitative data with the focus in Reading on a *flexible* (Anastas and MacDonald, 1994) narrative approach employing an in-depth interpretive analysis with a more *fixed* approach (*Ibid*) employing statistical analysis taken by Oxford

Brookes. The means by which data were gathered from undergraduate students at Reading are presented in summary form in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Research design overview (Reading)

Year of project	Cohort	Method
1	2008/2009 (First year)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group • 5 Student interviews 'close up study'
2	2009/2010 (First year) 2009/2010 (Second year)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus group • 4 Student interviews 'close up study' • Survey (long – N=2,944, responses n= 171) • Survey (short – N=2,944, responses n= 240) • 4 Student interviews 'close up study' (one student had suspended their studies)
3	All students 2010/2011 (First year) 2010/2011(Second year) 2010/2011 (Third year)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey of one-stop shop users Freshers' week (N=41) • Survey (short – N=2,640, responses n= 95) • 4 Student interviews 'close up study' • 1 student interview (not from 'close up study') • 3 Student interviews 'close up study' (student who suspended studies withdrew from project and another student was on work placement)

The findings relating to these data collection methods will be presented later in this report. In order to present a balanced perspective on personal tutoring at Reading, we conducted five semi-structured interviews with practicing senior and personal tutors.

The means by which data were gathered from undergraduate students at Oxford Brookes are presented in summary form in Table 4 below. It must also be noted that the team at Oxford Brookes was able to draw on findings collected through action research within the Life Sciences School since 2005. This is in line with Zuber-Skerritt (1996) who suggests that the aim of action research is to bring about

improvement, innovation and change with practitioner's gaining a better understanding of their practices.

Table 4: Research design overview (Oxford Brookes)

Year of project	Method
1	Year 1 students complete survey questionnaire, tutorial attendance monitored
2	Year 2 students at risk interviewed. Focus groups organised and results monitored Year 1 students complete survey questionnaire, focus groups organised, tutorial attendance monitored Semi structured interviews with staff and students
3	Year 1 students complete survey questionnaire, focus groups organised, tutorial attendance monitored Semi structured interviews with staff and students

Cluster Group Involvement

This project is unique within the Retention Grant Programme for establishing a cluster group network. As part of this innovation, the Universities of Reading, Oxford Brookes, Bournemouth, Surrey, City, Roehampton, Goldsmiths, Creative Arts and St George's were invited to apply for small scale funding to facilitate fellowship projects to help us evaluate what works to ensure student success. The reasons for establishing the cluster group were two fold; to ensure that our project had a network of support whilst we were gathering and analysing our data not just on our own institutions but on the needs of the wider sector and also to find out what works in other institutions in order to strength the findings of our project. Each fellowship developed their own methods and this collaboration has provided us with rich and rewarding data in terms of what works at other HEIs and we have been able to draw conclusions from this as well as make comparisons with the main findings from Reading and Oxford Brookes. six fellowship projects have been completed and

evaluated (see Appendix G: Fellowship Project Summaries,) the main findings of which are listed below:²

Key messages from evaluation

Our key headline messages are summarised below. Evidence to scaffold these messages follows.

What works:

Giving students a reason to engage through structured support

- Tutorials forming part of the culture of an institution provide a visible and structured system of support and help to foster a sense of belonging amongst students; which is something that they identify as being of great value.
- Measures to improve academic confidence can make the difference between a student's success and failure to progress.
- Accessible central support services can smooth the transition to university and ensure that students engage with the institution.

Building strong relationships

- Relationship building between staff and students is central to contributing to student success. The relationships formed by a tutor and tutee can be amongst the most effective in terms of fostering independent learning and realising potential.
- Students considering withdrawing found interaction with their Personal Tutor helpful.
- Visible and accessible support mechanisms, make students feel a greater sense of belonging to their institution.

² Copies of full length Fellowship final reports available on request

Ensuring staff feel like part of the solution, not part of the problem

- Personal tutors want to feel valued and rewarded for their role. When this happens, engagement increases.
- Providing the opportunity for staff to become involved (to an extent) with the structure of tutorials can lead to increased engagement.
- Lack of staff engagement with a tutorial system can be a barrier to students deciding to remain at university.

Evaluation evidence and analysis in support of key messages

Giving students a reason to engage through structured support

Both Reading and Oxford Brookes have empirical evidence which suggests that students respond well when institutional support is provided to ensure that students' pastoral and academic development needs are met. Analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data on the effectiveness of support systems particularly personal tutoring at Reading and Oxford Brookes has resulted in the following checklist as an example of what is working at these institutions:

- Having a named Personal Tutor who is available from the induction period.
- Having early engagement with a Personal Tutor, either in a group or on an individual basis is a crucial element in settling in and establishing a sense of belonging within the institution.
- Having access to academic staff generally, but particularly a Personal Tutor.
- Getting a sense that academic staff and Personal Tutors are interested in and committed to their well being and their academic progress.

We were allocated a personal tutor in the first week and they emailed us and arranged a meeting...he basically said it was there to check up, to make sure that everyone's doing okay...Yeah I think that was really good. (Reading student)

I want to have a relationship with her [Personal Tutor] so I'll email her and ask for a meeting. (Reading student)

I feel disappointed that I don't have a relationship with her [Personal Tutor] and if I had a problem I'd sort it out with family and friends. I'm disappointed about this because I'd like to have a more friendly informal relationship with staff in my department. (Reading student)

I haven't seen my personal tutor for a while. I'm sure he's only a personal tutor because he has to be. (Reading student)

The data gathered from the project has shown that the perception of personal tutoring by students is on the whole positive. Information on students' perceptions of personal tutoring at Reading was gathered through survey data administered to first year full time undergraduates (2010) and interviews with first and second year students during 2009/2011. A short survey (Appendix C) and a longer survey (Appendix D) were administered electronically to all first year full time undergraduates (N=2,944) in January and February 2010 respectively. The short survey was also administered electronically in February 2011 (N=2,640). Although the response rates for the three surveys was poor at only 8.15% (January 2010), 5.81% (February 2011) and 3.6% (2011) there is evidence to suggest that first year students are generally positive about their engagement with their personal tutor. Findings from the first survey (January 2010) reveal that first year students found their personal tutor was a source of helpful support when they considered withdrawing from university. Of those who had considered withdrawing over 60% spoke to their personal tutor and found the interaction either helpful or very helpful. Although it is important to note that 34% found their personal tutor neither helpful nor unhelpful and 5% found them unhelpful or very unhelpful. Despite this there is evidence to suggest that students considering withdrawing during their first year find their personal tutor helpful in deciding to remain on course.

In the longer survey (February 2010) which focused on expectations and experiences, students answered questions about their engagement with their personal tutor with an open ended question to allow for additional information. In keeping with the short survey responses findings were generally positive about their engagement with their personal tutor. The responses are presented in Table 5 below. There was high satisfaction with personal tutor availability (72%) and 65% found their personal tutor encouraging.

Table 5: Responses to engagement with personal tutor

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am happy with the availability of my personal tutor	25%	47%	15 %	8%	5%
My personal tutor is encouraging	29%	36%	24 %	5%	6%
My personal tutor has given me useful advice	26%	32%	28 %	8%	6%
My personal tutor has signposted me to useful web resources	12%	18%	33 %	28%	9%
We discuss my academic progress	22%	38%	22 %	11%	7%
We discuss my adjustment to university life	27%	40%	18 %	7%	8%
We discuss my personal development planning (PDP)	14%	26%	33 %	18%	9%

Fifteen students answered the open ended question to add additional information about their engagement with their personal tutor.

My personal tutor is extremely helpful in a range of ways and remains approachable with a range of matters.

We have also found that there are four additional elements to what is working across both universities:

- Friends and peers are an important informal source of support and also help smooth the transition to university.
- Structured peer support provides necessary reassurance for those struggling to settle.
- Clear communication is very important: particularly with regard to timetabling, room changes and staffing arrangements.
- Early feedback on progress facilitates engagement with their discipline.

...from a social point of view ...and from an academic point of view I was challenged...who's the administrator, your personal tutor, how to get your timetable and things like who is your course leader. Once that structure was there it flowed quite easily...I didn't know that it was necessarily what I expected but it was a positive first impression. (Reading student)

I didn't like the course I was on...and considered changing courses or leaving. I was encouraged by peer support and my personal tutor to stay longer to see if I would like it. (Reading student)

I got helped a lot by the women in the Carrington building [one-stop shop Helpdesk] and by the Hall [of residence] warden.

The data collected at Reading reveal that students appear to fall into three groups:

- Those whose expectations of their personal tutor were realised. They did not think their personal tutor was necessarily the only person they could discuss their progress with and they knew where to go if they required specific support.

- Those whose expectations of their personal tutor were not realised. Their meetings with their personal tutor were unsatisfactory and impersonal. Two students requested a change in their personal tutor. Their requests were granted.
- Those whose personal tutor meetings were unsatisfactory but this was something they were unconcerned about. They considered they did not really need to have a close relationship with their personal tutor as they had made relationships with other academic staff members.

...I didn't have any real problems or important questions to ask...if it was academic or about exams or assignments or something, I think she'd [Personal Tutor] be a good place to go. I think if it's a slightly smaller problem like I said before I'd perhaps ask my peers and they might be able to help me but if it was something that needed more support then I think I could go to her. (Reading student)

At Oxford Brookes, data relating to student perceptions of and engagement with PASS support the idea that structured support works for students: in an online questionnaire sent in April 2010 to all Life Sciences' students taking the compulsory module in 2009/10, 63% of students considered they had clearly benefitted from the PASS tutorials. The Intervention strand of PASS supports students who are struggling:

Hi, just wanted to say a massive thanks for helping me out over the last year or so! I've got my results! Skin of the teeth sort of stuff, but great that I got into my second year! (Oxford Brookes student)

A medium for me to...sort myself out... what I really needed to be getting on with, and sort of focussing on. (Oxford Brookes student)

I'm just writing about how your personal meetings with me during semester two helped me improve significantly. At the start I felt lost and had no idea how to plan out my work, until you suggested that having a timetable to help organise the way I work helped improve ... my work, as I got it done on time and with no worries at the end. Thank you... (Oxford Brookes student)

Outcomes from PASS intervention show that monitoring progress and early intervention produced a domino effect:

Improved student motivation → improved student engagement that → halted the downward spiral → improved student morale and self-esteem, enabling → improved performance in Semester 2 assessments.... and as a side product along with other aspects of PASS, improved student retention for the School.

Figure 6 below shows how the School retention rates have improved since 2003/2004.

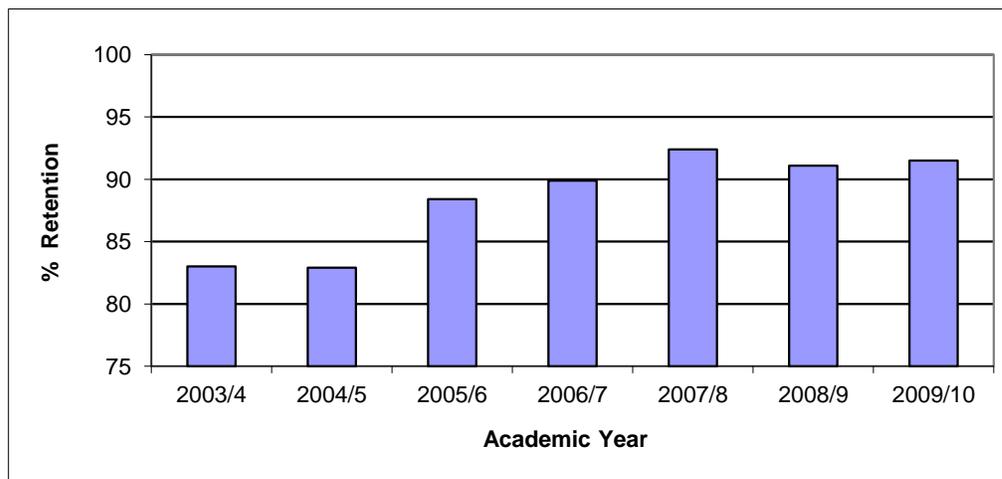


Figure 6: Life Sciences first year retention for 2003/4-2009/10 (University data)

Overall PASS has been credited by the School Dean for improving first year student retention by 8.5-9.5 percentage points (over 10% in real terms, Figure 6).

Developing academic confidence

One of the key elements of PASS is improving students' confidence in their academic ability. Sharing concerns through tutorials leads students to realising that many of their fears and concerns about studying are normal and shared by others. In response to the April 2010 questionnaire on student perceptions of PASS tutorials one respondent said:

[We] learn how others are feeling about the course and how they are getting on. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly and that helps everyone have a voice, which is important for those who wouldn't speak up in a lecture.

Comments collected by an independent reviewer (a former Project Officer at Oxford Brookes who was not part of the team delivering the PASS tutorials) – regarding PASS tutorials, which focus on improving academic skills, include some very positive feedback. Students report: *“PASS tutorials help...with the course... with scientific writing, note-taking, referencing, making module choices”*; *“they were all very helpful and constructive”*. Others found that the PASS tutorials made them *“more reflective about how I work”*.

Creating a sense of belonging can lead to an increase in an individual's academic confidence. Academic confidence can be problematic to measure and yet all those involved with supporting and developing students will instantly recognise the concept and the relationship between academic confidence and retention will resonate with many.

Furthermore, the Maths Support Fellowship at Reading (Appendix G) did much to raise the academic confidence of the 26 students who attended the drop-in sessions. Although none had expressed any intention of withdrawing, clearly all sought reassurance and support from the drop-in. Of further interest and possibly

warranting additional research is that of the 26 who attended these sessions, 25 were females.

The following narrative tells of one mature undergraduate student's journey through three years of her degree course. Grace's story is included here to highlight how important structured support is as students pass through higher education. Her social and academic experience at Reading was mixed and her confidence was knocked as her academic ability was criticised by her personal tutor who was also her lecturer. To place her story into context, key background information is provided and Grace's words are told in italics.

Grace's story

Grace is originally from Africa where she worked in Development. Prior to enrolling onto her social work degree course in 2008 she was employed as an assistant care worker for six years in the UK. She decided to undertake a degree in social work to help her to become more *empowered* in her job.

The frustrating part of working that job is that when you get a case sent you're doing it, but at the end when it becomes to a legal matter or anything major ... you hand it over to a qualified person.

When she arrives at university she is *overwhelmed* and as she has some health problems she visits the disability staff in the one-stop shop and they provide her with necessary equipment. During her first term she is quite anxious about the first assignments she has to complete as she has been out of education for some time. She discussed this with her personal tutor who suggests she visits study advice. Grace goes to the one-stop shop and makes an appointment to see a study adviser. However, when she gets her first marked assignment back she is very disappointed and her confidence is further knocked when her personal tutor points out:

You are not an academic person and I don't think you are probably doing well in that sense of academic...

Grace is determined to carry on and throughout her three years at university she has visited study advice at the one-stop shop for individual sessions and group workshops.

I get a lot of support from the student advice. They were quite, massively, very, very helpful, my margin of percentage got up a little bit.

At the end of her first year she makes a difficult decision to change her personal tutor which she is able to do quite easily. While she finds the work difficult she continues with her course and with

the help of other students, her new personal tutor and the study adviser she completes her second year successfully.

I feel I could have done much better if I had the support that I'm getting now in first year.

During her final year Grace sees a careers adviser who helps her complete application forms and prepares for her transition into work.

If you talk to someone it helps you understand.

On reflection, Grace comments

I think it's a wonderful university in so many aspects of it because they do promote mature students and they look at the needs of mature students, which I've found that they will support them to achieve certain things

Clarity of information and expectation

The 'What Do I have to DO?' fellowship project (see Appendix G) showed that creating a sense of personal voice through academic guidelines can act as an enabler to engagement with and understanding of guidelines. As Kate Williams, Head of Upgrade at Oxford Brookes states: "It's not spoon-feeding but enabling to fly"³. The key message from this research is if students don't understand what they need to do, it can impact retention.

Findings from the Portsmouth fellowship 'The impact of pre-entry communications on student expectations, early experiences and retention' (see Appendix G) show that providing students with a clear understanding of what to expect from the university experience, and what is expected of them, further helps to promote engagement.

Responses to an online survey was used to gather views and feedback from approximately 300 first year students at the University of Portsmouth who had used the project's pre-entry website show that accessing information on the website and communicating in social networking forums had a positive impact on students' perceptions about going to university and helped them understand more about learning and living in a higher education environment. Preparedness for higher

³Kate Williams during a presentation at a Cluster Group fellowship dissemination event, June 2011.

education is a factor in helping to retain students (Cook & Rushton, 2008) and therefore the pre-entry site at Portsmouth could be seen to be aiding retention.

Building strong relationships

Findings from both institutions show very clearly that the support students' value most as they progress through University is derived from their relationships: with friends and family; with staff; and with the institution itself. When these relationships work well, students are more likely to succeed.

Tutor/tutee relationships

My Personal Tutor, although I haven't gone to her for any problems like that because I haven't had any big problems, I felt like I've got to know her a lot more this year because last year I thought I'd go to the meetings, not really prepared to talk, I'd just pop my head round and say 'Everything's fine, there's nothing going on, don't worry about me.' But this year I thought I probably should get to know her more because she'll be the person writing my references, I suppose, when I want to get a job, not that that was the only reason. (Reading student)

So I've made more of an effort to communicate with her a bit better about what's going on, ask questions more because I didn't really ask any questions last year even though there were things I wanted to know about like exams and what to expect, how I'm doing compared to the others in my year, what I need to do to improve. I suppose I do get support from her as well, if I need it, which is good. (Reading student)

In my first year I found the course I was on so overwhelming difficult that I didn't think I should stay, but with the help of my tutor I was able to narrow down the subjects that I could transfer onto in order to make the most of my abilities and switched departments. (Reading student)

The following quotes highlight the perceptions of relationship building between tutor and tutee from the tutor's perspective.

I can't hold myself out as a psychiatrist and a therapist and an academic adviser to all the students I have. I try to be approachable. (Reading tutor)

I think if someone is not comfortable with somebody they probably would not be willing to mention that there is a particular em you know personal issue.... (Reading tutor)

At Oxford Brookes interviews with Personal Tutors and open questions in a student survey (Appendix E) yielded data that allowed comparison of staff and student views of their relationship. Both see the connection as social as well as academic, and both emphasise respect as being key to the relationship. The effect of a good relationship is more than simply reassuring, although that is very important. It also helps them to feel they belong; it can inspire a student to engage fully with their studies and potentially inspire their career ideas. Without the accessibility of Personal Tutors none of this can happen. Table 6 below shows the nature of these relationships and how they operate at Oxford Brookes in Life Sciences.

Table 6: Relationship building between tutor and tutee through PASS

<i>Staff view</i>	<i>Student view</i>
What is the nature of this relationship?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A social connection • Student respect for tutor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal, 'Getting to know' the tutor • Mutual respect • Caring • Regular
What is the effect of this relationship?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can give students insights into their ability • It can motivate and engage a student, lighting a 'spark' • Someone to turn to; a point of contact • Potential students and their parents are reassured (selling point) • Feeling connected to the university/school (seen as more important by some tutors than others) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback • Guidance • Inspiration – a model for future career • Reassurance • Help you to 'keep on top of things' • Improvement in communication skills • Sense of belonging to the School and University
What are the barriers to this?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When tutors are either not able or willing to be accessible • Attendance problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When tutors are either not able or willing to be accessible • Lack of respect for tutor

PASS creates chances for relationship building between tutors and tutees:

- 89% said they had enough contact with their academic advisor through PASS to feel known as an individual. Of these, 67% believe this helped them through their first year
- 88% feel comfortable enough to turn to their academic advisor (AA) with academic problems. Of these 77% found this helpful.⁴

Of course this relationship may be built in contexts other than the PASS tutorials, so contexts were compared. Although, as would be expected, practicals are good for

⁴ on a 1-5 scale of helpfulness they answered between 3 and 5 (1=this didn't play any part in helping me through my first year, 2=didn't help me very much, 3=did help me, 4= helped me a lot, 5=was a huge help).

this relationship building, PASS tutorials are considerably better: 18% of respondents put '5: strong (relationship built)' for PASS, but only 4.5% did so for practical work.

It is very positive that 82% of students would talk to their academic advisor if they had a personal problem that was affecting their work and is a good indication of the value of the rapport they feel has been built:

Made me feel... that there were people to talk to if needed.

The following narrative of one student's journey through the Personal and Academic Support (PASS) intervention told in his own words illustrates clearly the benefits of reciprocal student and staff relationships. His critical moments are highlighted in bold and his story is told in italics.

Adam's story

AT RISK INDICATION

Came... from let's say not the most privileged background and I've had to fight my way up a lot more compared to people who - how can I put this? - come from a privileged background. Their perspective is shown a lot more compared to people who haven't got that kind of background.

DIFFICULT TRANSITION

I don't think I actually did manage to handle [the transition from school to university] until maybe until the second semester of the first year.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FIRST MEETING PERSONAL TUTOR

It was during the first year, we had Personal Tutor meetings and those were at the beginning not one to one, they were part of a group. But then... I used to ask him once in a while if I could meet up with him just so I could have an academic checkpoint... just a chance to go through everything that I was going through.

I think the whole university experience might've gone a different path I think... if it wasn't

for the fact that we had to go to first year meetings. From there from getting that kind of trust between us.

PERSONAL STRUGGLES

My problems I faced at university weren't really academic problems, they were literally things out of my hands. You know, I had a lot of financial situations... I had family problems, had a few health problems, and he has been there to guide me through that and at least give me reassurance from the academic side that I can still achieve even though I was going through those problems.

It was my tutor who I can honestly say - my Personal Tutor was the person who got me through these past few years... You do find your own help from your friends... but you also sometimes need to have that academic figure there, and I can't say enough to thank him... It wasn't a case of me thinking he is keeping tabs on me, or he is looking me up because I'm a problem child ... it was a genuine concern for what I could achieve, and how I could achieve it.

PASS MENTORING

Because my grades were so low they did decide to have some kind of intervention, a kind of interview to know what the situation was, and from there it was just a case of just checking up on me. That was what the University officially did.

At the time I thought it was just a formality. I mean I could say especially in the first year I didn't find anything especially hard, but I did fail that one module where I didn't revise and to be honest I didn't have much care for. But it was a case of... just knowing what the academic problem... was, or was it genuine outside influences.

Going through some work to try and see where I was academically, just trying to gauge... it was a combination of outside problems and a bit of lethargy... After that I mean it was emails, it wasn't anything too massive, it was just email at the end of semester just to check up.

REALITY CHECK

Realising I was living in denial, that I was thinking university was going to be easy especially even the second year. The amount of work, that is one thing I will have to say about university that's negative, because the jump of the work from the first year to the second year is very, very, very massive. Where you find in the first year you're doing A

level stuff for example, in the second year you do jump into university level work and it's a complete eye opener...

One or two modules weren't explained properly... to the detriment of my morale at the time... I think in the second year apart from my Personal Tutor I wasn't told about my options.

ON REFLECTION

I would've never've dropped out of university... but I think the level of work would have been just enough... I did stay an extra fourth year... to try and improve a 2.2 to a 2.1.

I think a lot of achievements have to happen from the person themselves, and I think I did achieve a lot of things just through my willpower, but I can't knock what [my Personal Tutor] has done for me.

Student/HEI relationships

Students have told us repeatedly that visible and accessible support mechanisms provide reassurance that their institution cares about them, their wellbeing and their success and tends to strengthen their relationship with that institution. Evidence from the project shows that a positive side-effect of regular contact with a member of staff, such as a Personal Tutor, can engender a sense of belonging, as this student says of PASS:

I feel it is a great system to get to know your academic advisor and this makes me feel more involved in the Life Science department.

The What do I have to DO? Fellowship also demonstrates that getting to know your students is fundamental to getting a good match or mismatch in terms of the information you give them. Building this relationship feeds into what works for students.

We have already seen that Grace, one of the Reading 'close up' study students accessed the one-stop shop on a number of occasions as she pursued her studies;

disability, study advice, careers. For all those visiting the one-stop shop the first port of call is the Helpdesk. Since opening in September 2007, the Helpdesk of Student Services has dealt with a steady stream of students. Data provided by the Helpdesk Team Leader show that up to Autumn 2009 there was a 25% increase in contact with the helpdesk staff compared with the same period the previous year. Findings to date for 2009/2010 show that 96% of all calls are dealt with at the first response rate in an average of 3.6 minutes. This is 2% higher than findings for the last academic year. These findings are significant because when located within a student 'belonging' framework, the queries dealt with can ease anxiety and facilitate the transition into university for new students. The queries most commonly dealt with by helpdesk advisors relate to accommodation, enrolment certificates, bank letters and financial matters, all of which are crucial to successful transitions into university. During the first three weeks of term the majority of queries are from international students. With its central location on campus, all support services including careers, disability, counselling, finance and study advice report an increase in footfall and service usage. A survey conducted with 41 users of the one-stop shop in Freshers' Week 2010 shows that all found the service very helpful or helpful. Comments included:

The helpdesk staff are always very helpful.

Helpful. They told me what I need to do about it. At least they were honest about what I need to do.

Very helpful. Someone came and asked me before I queued what help I needed and pointed me in the right direction. Really helpful!

The lady was lovely actually! Really helpful. Very good.

Really good. Smiley and friendly.

[Name of helpdesk staff member] is awesome!

Excellent. Brilliant. Absolutely spot on!

Making staff feel like part of the solution, not part of the problem

Any intervention designed to improve the student experience can bring with it an implicit criticism of existing practices, which in turn can put staff on the defensive, and disinclined to engage with new initiatives. Our evidence suggests that the models that work for staff tend to be those that address the following issues:

- **Balance in structure and materials**

Lack of structure can also leave staff feeling vulnerable and disincentivised to act in the role of a Personal Tutor.

Levels of staff engagement in PASS since its introduction in 2005/6 have a direct correlation with the degree of structure involved in delivering the scheme. Initially, there was some staff resistance to PASS’s proactive approach, evidenced by some tutors not delivering their tutorials, but since embedding tutorials into a taught module with assessed coursework (in response to staff feedback), staff compliance rose to 95% in 2009/10 (see Figure 7).

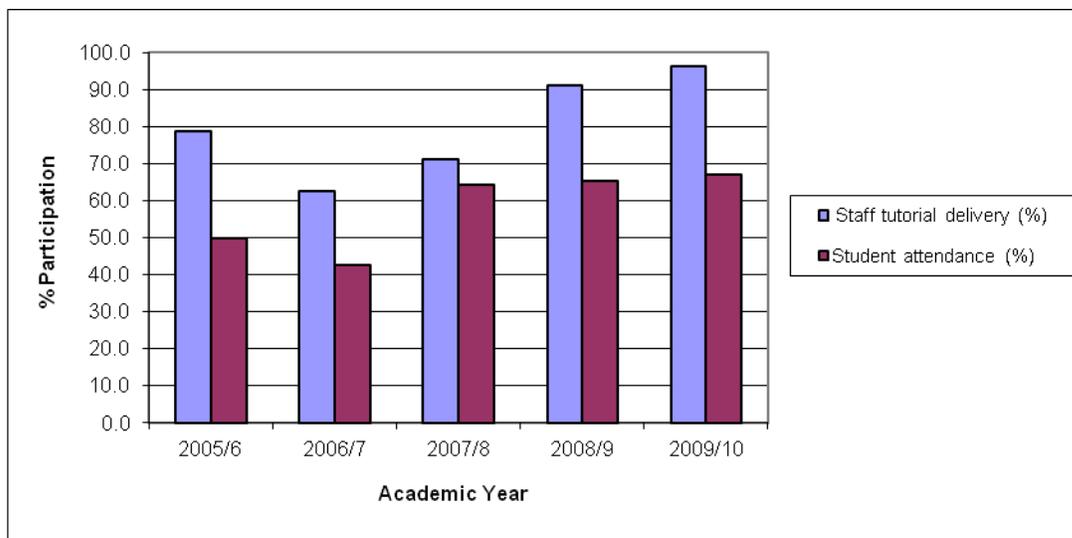


Figure 7: Staff delivery of PASS tutorials and student uptake

Improved staff engagement meant that most students were offered all PASS tutorials, enabling the student uptake to improve and implying that pro-active support was available to students that might be vulnerable to withdrawal.

It requires that I make time, prioritise time to speak to the students on a regular basis. Now that's really important, because then they're more likely to come and talk to you. (Staff member, Oxford Brookes)

Conversely we have also gathered evidence to show that too rigid a structure which is felt be imposed on tutors (as opposed to being developed with them) can also lead to disengagement from tutors.

I went into it [x] years ago thinking, "Fantastic, I'm going to have a nice little flock of advisees I can teach and pass on my wisdom to", and it's funny, the more organisation that's gone into this the more difficult and confusing it has become. (Unengaged tutor, Oxford Brookes)

Staff feedback on the PASS tutorials and learning materials, gathered through a series of 18 semi-structured interviews in 2009/10 (see Appendix F: Staff Perspectives on Learning in the PASS Tutorial System) indicated that even when staff were supportive of the aim of improving certain academic skills, they preferred to take control of aspects of how this would be done. Referring to the essay writing assignment, which students must complete in their first semester, one tutor commented:

What we should see them about is not to baby them through essays for example, because partly the essay titles are not particularly interesting... we did used to set our personal tutees an essay, but we would set it and take them through the whole process... that was much more satisfactory than having them set by someone else some distance away

In response to this point, tutors set their own essay titles in 2010/11.

Over the last decade, Goldsmiths introduced two well researched and developed models of personal development planning (PDP) linked with tutoring (Appendix G). In a nutshell, both failed to engage students and staff. Adam Cresswell, who was involved with both and who was part of our cluster group told us that the institution learnt from both experiences but did nothing with the knowledge. In an attempt to break the cycle Adam encouraged academic colleagues to take ownership of staff development workshops in two pilot departments. Anecdotally, this yielded positive results (although detailed feedback had not been collected at the time of submission), and Goldsmith's has committed to running further four workshops at school level, with academics at the helm.

A final point in terms of materials is not to make it hard for either side to get to the information they need to know. The 'What do I have to DO' project (Appendix G) results include a quote from a student commenting on some academic guidelines; "Why is this on p.26? I could have done with it sooner".

- **Support for tutors**

Tutors at both institutions have taken on more ownership of tutorials and as long as there is a central contact in place to mitigate this and offer support we have found that this works well for staff and students.

I take them very seriously [personal tutorial meetings] – some students don't show up, some students just show up because they have to...some students don't show up even though they have to, some students show up with issues, although some students contact me personal tutee or not, outside the formal personal tutee meetings so a lot has to do with commitment and the extent to which staff and students take it seriously. (Personal Tutor, Reading)

I go through each one of their projects or their... essay titles for example and just show them, "Ok your essay title is this so I would search for this" and then I illustrate

it by using each one of their work in turn. So I use that as a way to get more of a relationship with them. (Personal tutor, Oxford Brookes)

Staff members also tell us that a bit of recognition goes a long way:

Turning academics into social workers... you see if you are a social worker you are assessed on how you do your social work. If you are an academic it doesn't matter a hill of beans. That's wrong. If you want people to do this sort of stuff [be a personal tutor or senior tutor] you have to acknowledge it.

One of the most important and valuable support mechanisms available to staff at Reading is a comprehensive Personal Tutor's Handbook. While most of the detail is delivered via a website there is also a short, easy to use A5 guide for tutors to refer to. This handbook has been in place for many years at Reading and forms the basis of the training and support for Personal and Senior Tutors. It is highly regarded across the sector (see CRA site) and Reading receives several enquiries and visits most years from other institutions who are reviewing their personal tutorial system, guidance or both. Supporting staff is essential in maintaining an effective and supportive system of personal tutoring for students. The infrastructure at Reading (See Figure 1) is crucial in terms of the personnel involved but having clear and accessible guidelines available for staff is also vital. One very positive output of this project is that it has promoted a further review at Reading of the handbook and associated resources (including overviews of staff development sessions) with the findings of this project and associated outputs such as the video clips being built into the updated resources. The website has always been open access and is one way in which we intend to promote the findings and outputs of the Reading/ Oxford Brookes project.

- **Engagement from all sides**

In a lively and discursive seminar session hosted by Reading on behalf of the project, the overarching message from the delegates (staff and students alike) was

that engagement and commitment by students and staff members are vital to successful tutoring. This was closely followed by institutional support in terms of materials, reward and recognition and providing institutional support for whatever model is in place.

What has become clear from talking to staff at Reading and Oxford Brookes is that it takes time to be a good Personal Tutor. Willingness and enthusiasm for the role are clearly critical, but making time for the development of this role is also crucial.

The findings below relate mainly to the delivery of skills-based group (PASS) tutorials unless otherwise stated. Staff members have told us they value:

- Clarity of aims and objectives. Knowing what is expected of them.
 - Clear and concise instructions when expected to deliver tutorial sessions.
 - Having a sense of flexibility and control over what is delivered and how it is delivered in tutorials.
 - Being given opportunities for input into models of tutorial delivery.
 - Constructive feedback and opportunities for training when required.
 - Students' involvement in the tutorial process, by making a commitment to their engagement and taking responsibility for reflective learning (applies across both institutions in individual and group meetings).
 - Enabling students' transfer to independence; being encouraged to teach in a way that encourages students' independent thinking rather than 'spoon feeding'.
-
- **A word of warning - Avoiding the 'problem' model**

It is inevitable that some students who go to see their personal tutors are in some sort of crisis state or have an identified problem or issue that needs addressing. What has become apparent is that tutorials should not be solely based on a problem model. As the President of the RUSU commented: *Where can students go when*

something goes right?...what about the student who is getting a good grade but who has no idea why?

The 'close up' study at Reading shows that for some students a clear message is given by personal tutors who are seen to be less than enthusiastic about their role

...only come and see me if you have a problem.

Students want to share their experiences, both positive and negative and build on their achievements. Tutors and academic staff generally have a role to play in this developmental activity. Moreover, in a context where employability skills are high on the graduate agenda and employers are expecting references from tutors who actually *know* their students and can set them apart from the thousands of other graduates; the personal tutorial has great potential as an enabling environment. Reflection, Personal Development Planning (PDP), goal setting; call it what you will, reviewing academic progress, personal development and planning for the future are essential skills. These are also skills that are difficult for students to grasp and they are also difficult to measure or identify. A strong relationship between tutor and tutee can make the difference in raising aspirations and encouraging successful academic and labour market outcomes.

Supplementary evidence to demonstrate what works

In addition to the main research conducted at Reading and Oxford Brookes outlined above, this project contained two other elements in order to strengthen our evidence as to what works to ensure student success. These took the form of fellowships opened to other institutions (Appendix G) and case studies of two Schools at Reading. The findings for both these ventures are presented below.

1. Student Retention & Success Fellowships – summaries of findings

Bournemouth: *Improving academic confidence – use of blogging to build an e-portfolio formative assessment for first year Creative Technology students.*

Part of the Higher Education Retention and Engagement project (Here!), this study had two strands of activity: the triggers that shift a student doubter⁵ from doubting to persisting; the characteristics of study programmes that are more successful in retaining their students than others.

Key findings:

- course related factors, including academic confidence, is a high doubting trigger for new students
- two examples of current good practice (Stepping Stones 2HE and the Learning to Learn week) show a 'safe' introduction to assessment at the beginning of the students' first year improves retention
- students found blogging a useful way to engage with work and each other

Portsmouth: *The impact of pre-entry communications on student expectations, early experiences and retention.*

This research examines the influence of a pre-entry website and Facebook groups on students' expectations and experiences and discusses the potential impact on levels of retention.

Key findings:

- If students have unrealistic expectations, they are more likely to have poor experiences and therefore more likely to leave - addressing student concerns early can help retention
- Accessing information on the pre-entry website had a positive impact on students' perceptions about going to university and helped them understand more about learning and living in an HE environment
- Having a social network alongside the pre-entry website helped students share experiences, which they found reassuring and helped them relate to their HEI/other students better.

⁵Students were classified as 'doubters' or 'non doubters' according to their response to the question "Have you ever thought about leaving".

Reading Study Advice: *ASK me – developing a ‘quick query’ model for in-house study advice*

A model of expert peer advice was piloted in four departments at the University of Reading during spring term 2011. It aimed to reach students who have questions about their studies but who feel reluctant to ask their tutors or visit a centralised Study Advice service.

Key findings:

- Offering Schools an adaptable model with support works – there was a high level of departmental engagement and interest in the scheme
- The model enhanced relationship building, and seemed to provide a good strategy for local community building
- The scheme worked particularly well for certain ‘at risk’ groups, such as mature students, who may lack the confidence to approach staff with ‘trivial’ work-related questions

Reading Maths Support: *Mathematics support for trainee teachers*

This project offered dedicated drop-in maths support sessions for trainee teachers, based two miles away from the University’s main campus and support services, needing to pass the compulsory QTS numeracy test.

Key findings:

- Targeted support was of great benefit to a specific group who might otherwise be at risk of failing
- The drop-in nature of the sessions provided an academic boost to more confident students
- Good student outcomes and further funding provide evidence of the scheme’s efficacy

Oxford Brookes/Reading Study Advice: *What do I have to DO? Student reaction to guidance on assessment tasks*

The aim of this project was to gain an insight into what helps, or hinders, students in understanding what exactly they are required to do to succeed in their assessment tasks by capturing students' reactions to the assessment tasks/assignments and the additional guidance offered in course handbooks.

Key findings:

- Where the 'match' between tutor and student expectations is effective, students will find clarity, comprehensible language, and thoughtful, communicative guidance
- Where there is a 'mismatch' between tutor and student expectations, students perceive these qualities to be absent, and are less clear about what they have to do
- Relationship building between staff and students is key to getting a good 'match', which in turn aids retention

Goldsmiths: *Taking a discipline-specific approach to PDP and the recognition of transferrable skills*

This project sought to pilot activities that worked to embed skills development at departmental level within an existing framework by using the resources available to develop a transferrable skills workshop that could be disseminated, shared and utilised by other departments once the short term 'project' was completed.

- Staff engage well when given an active role in the solution, and are the best ones to engage students with PDP
- A small amount of resource can produce a transferrable model
- The model was sensitive to the needs of and the demands already imposed on our academic departments and as such was well received

What our cluster group fellowships have shown is that with a small amount of funding it is possible to investigate pockets of practice or to develop materials which all seek to address the issue of what works for students in terms of retention and progression.

2. Case study: School of Systems Engineering (SSE)

At Reading over the past three years, the School of Systems Engineering at Reading has been monitoring student engagement during classes, with low levels of engagement leading to additional communication with the personal tutor.

The aim was to assess the extent to which each student engages in each of their modules, which is determined by individual lecturers on a scale of three; whether students are not engaged, engaged, or very engaged. The initial phase of analysis of the data (Summer 2009) shows that although most 'at risk' students improved, by the Summer all failed.

At the end of the first year of the intervention it was clear that the pass rate of the first year cohort increased. However, staff in SSE are keen to point out that they cannot solely attribute this to the intervention. What they are sure of is that playing up the common interest of the subject area of the personal tutors and students as a focal point within personal tutorial meetings is crucial to engaging both students and staff.

Whilst working with SSE there have been ongoing discussions as to whether they are monitoring attendance, engagement or both. It seems that the answer on this depends on the module being monitored. Differences in teaching and assessment methods appear to dictate what can be measured. For example, in a module focusing on gaming it is much easier for the tutor to measure engagement as it is clear in the seminar style setting to ascertain how students are interacting with one another. Labs are much harder to assess for engagement due to the nature of the work and engagement here is largely assessed by attendance although there are also online quizzes in Blackboard which the students are encouraged to undertake. It should be noted that in the School of Systems Engineering is currently under review and as such is under considerable pressure to focus on their collective research profile. This is not to detract from supporting student engagement as an

important and worthwhile activity but is a factor which should be taken into consideration when reviewing progress of the student engagement initiative.

The data gathered by SSE correlate with the data gathered from Oxford Brookes PASS Interventions. These monitor module failure rates, with high levels of failure leading to the offer of mentoring from staff.

Evidence so far suggests that the additional personal contact with staff involved is a factor in the effectiveness of such schemes.

3. Case study: School of Law

The transition to university is multifaceted and requires academic as well as personal and social adjustment. As students are most likely to withdraw from university in their first year (Thomas, 2002; Quinn et al., 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008), it is important that support is available to smooth that academic adjustment. In this study we have identified different departments who have introduced modules to encourage skills development which contribute to overall progression. The best example of this at Reading is the School of Law who have introduced a Legal Skills module to prepare students for the academic rigour required within the discipline. The School of Law monitors student attendance and 'poor attenders' (those absent from three or more classes/tutorials) are referred to the Senior Tutor. As part of the data collection for this project, the Senior Tutor, Student Support Advisor, Legal Skills Module Convenor, and three Personal Tutors have been interviewed about their perceptions of how the students engage with the module and their personal tutor meetings, and about their perspective on the effectiveness of institutional support for students.

If I had a choice, would I be a Personal Tutor? Yeah probably because I think it's good that students... know that they can talk to someone in confidence about issues. I'm not sure that's something that existed when I was an undergraduate. I think

Reading at least the Law School and Reading in general prides itself on its tutee system. (Personal Tutor, School of Law)

It's nice to know the students early... to be honest I just like talking to them as people. You don't learn much other than just talking to them. (Personal Tutor, School of Law)

I think it's based on their personality and probably how much, you know, they click with me. Because I think if someone is not comfortable with somebody they probably would not be willing to mention that there is a particular... issue. (Personal Tutor, School of Law)

The following is a summary from the Senior Tutor, School of Law, Dr Charlotte Smith.

About 190 part 1 students do Legal Skills here each year (160 here and 30 at Taylors, Malaysia campus). I see about 30 students per year as part of our tutorial monitoring system and Jane (Study Support Advisor) would see about another 20 voluntarily – she spends about 5 hours a week purely on monitoring attendance and contacting students regarding absences. Chris (Specialist Careers and Employability Advice) sees about 25 students a year for individual meetings and dozens at the end of his lectures. He emails many more.

We tend not to lose students after part one (maybe exceptionally 1 in any given year – usually for health or family reasons). We lost 15 first years this year (2011/12) but usually we would be closer to 10. Most of these left in the first few weeks after deciding that Law and/or Reading were not for them. Often they have transferred to other departments. One left this year due to general unhappiness after being out of education for two years and one decided that she was not ready for university.

I think our retention levels are good because students believe that a law degree is a valuable commodity, and because we put a huge effort into induction and early

intervention when we spot difficulties. We are very proactive in terms of getting students in when they start missing things or falling behind and make wide use of Study Advice and Counselling.

The comments here indicate the importance the School of Law place on the monitoring of their students to ensure all make a smooth transition into university and are aware that the School and thus the institution takes an interest in their well being as well as their academic success.

Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this project have important implications for higher education which essentially revolve around the importance of social as well as academic engagement to ensure student success. At institutional level we emphasise the value of:

- **Building relationships between staff and students to ensure student success.**

An important aspect of retaining students in higher education is this personal contact (Marr & Aynsley-Smith, 2006; National Audit Office, 2007) and our findings across both institutions show that a tutorial system facilitates relationship building between students and staff provided there is engagement, responsibility and commitment from both sides. Institutional support for those considering withdrawing early or at risk of failure in their first year is predominantly provided by Personal Tutors and the tutorial process. It is important to note, though, that those struggling academically also seek support through study advice and other academic staff as well as from their Personal Tutor.

- **Reward and recognition of the role of Personal Tutor**

Ensuring Personal Tutors receive credit as well as training to provide pastoral and academic care for students. Given the key role that Personal Tutors play in student

progression and integration, institutions need to acknowledge their contribution. This work needs to be rewarded rather than undervalued as it appears to be currently. This has institutional implications as training, increased resources and staffing will be required.

- **Questioning the need for and use of the identification of ‘at risk’ students**

This project raises questions about the ethics and accuracy of using criteria to create lists of students who may be considered at risk of withdrawal.

- Who should know who is ‘at risk’: planners, Personal Tutors, lecturers?
- Is it ethical to treat someone differently because they are labelled as ‘at risk’?
- Is it ethical to put someone in an ‘at risk’ category and not tell them?
- Would knowing they are ‘at risk’ help or hinder a student’s progress?
- Is it ethical to put someone in an ‘at risk’ category if the concept of ‘at risk’ is contested, and the classification may not be accurate?

We suggest that for the purposes of targeting and planning support, the current performance of students (rather than past performance or students’ confidence levels) is more meaningful. We would advocate ensuring support is available for all students regardless of ‘at risk’ status; paying particular attention to the first year experience generally (Yorke & Longden, 2004, 2008; Johnston, 2010) in order to maximize students’ chances of success.

Our project critical friend has been keen that we do not lose sight of the ethical considerations around identifying students as being at risk. We thank her for helping us to question our practice in this area and institutionally at Reading our senior management team took this into account when deciding that we should no longer identify a minority, but rather focus on providing support for the majority.

- **Student development for all**

Moving the focus away from retention per se, towards developing student success as a result of teaching, learning, feedback and assessment procedures and student-staff dialogue assisted by institutional support provision⁶.

- **The one-stop shop model to increase access to support services.**

Services housed within the one-stop shop (accommodation, careers, counselling, disability, finance, helpdesk, study advice) have reported an increased usage by students compared with previous years. This success has led to interest from other higher education institutions with 14 HEIs visiting to gain more information about this student services model.

Implications at a departmental level are for actions which can be more responsive to the specific context of the students and subjects therein. We emphasise the value of:

- **Relationship building**

Relationship building between staff and students is once again emphasised at this level, where the tutorial system can be adjusted to suit the context. PASS tutorials' most effective function is the building of this relationship, the implication being that having a compulsory context in which Personal Tutors interact with students in as small a ratio as possible is very valuable.

- **Monitoring student success or engagement.**

⁶ For example, accommodation, careers, counselling, disability, finance, helpdesk, peer support, study advice.

At Reading, the School of Systems Engineering monitors student engagement during classes, with low levels of engagement leading to additional communication with the personal tutor. At Oxford Brookes PASS Intervention monitors module failure rates, with high levels of failure leading to the offer of mentoring from staff. Evidence suggests that the additional personal contact with staff involved is a factor in the effectiveness of such schemes.

These initiatives are important as they address two of Henderson et al's (2007) key elements which are fundamental to the transition to adulthood and the trajectory into higher education: feelings of competence and developing a sense of belonging which is a crucial dimension of inclusion or exclusion.

Clearly there are issues as to whether or not attendance is equal to engagement.

Does embedded student support and personal tutoring provide value for money for an institution?

Oxford Brookes are able to make a financial case for the PASS system, particularly PASS Intervention where student retention can be quantified. For example: fee capitation for science students is currently close to £10,000 per annum and with spending on campus, income to the University per student rises above that. When one first year student is retained and completes their degree within 3 years, £20,000 of fee income is retained. PASS Intervention has retained £1.22 million during 4 years of implementation with a total of 56 students.

There are of course, some universities that do not have a system of personal tutoring. Some have advisers in student services settings which deal with both academic and pastoral issues. Some institutions take the view that all of their staff, academic and support, fulfil the role in a variety of contexts which include seminars, academic skills sessions, and sessions which focus on personal development planning. Universities with a college structure have intensive tutorials which cover

mainly academic issues.

It is commonplace now for universities to boast a 'world class student experience'. A student experience is made up of various factors, many of which are extra-curricular, related to social groups, accommodation, familial relations etc. A robust, available and supportive tutorial system with each student having a named tutor who can stay with them throughout their programme can be enormously valuable to both parties. Many institutions opt for tutors who are responsible for students in one part of a programme only, but allowing the tutor to remain with the student throughout their programme fosters consistency and a real sense of opportunity for development by the student, both personally and academically. This kind of mature and engaged relationship not only serves to encourage the student to work with the tutor effectively to realise their potential but also enables the tutor to fulfil the requirement of reference writing to very good effect.

It was during the first year, we had Personal Tutor meetings and those were at the beginning not one to one, they were part of a group. But then... I used to ask him once in a while if I could meet up with him just so I could have an academic checkpoint... just a chance to go through everything that I was going through...It was my tutor who I can honestly say - my Personal Tutor was the person who got me through these past few years... You do find your own help from your friends... but you also sometimes need to have that academic figure there, and I can't say enough to thank him... It wasn't a case of me thinking he is keeping tabs on me, or he is looking me up because I'm a problem child ... it was a genuine concern for what I could achieve, and how I could achieve it. I think the whole university experience might've gone a different path I think... if it wasn't for the fact that we had to go to first year meetings. From there from getting that kind of trust between us. Life Sciences Student, Oxford Brookes University.

In a context of widening access and increased student fees, a system of tutoring offered as part of an integrated model of support for students surely adds value.

What is more difficult to quantify is how consistent the value is and what impact personal tutoring has on the individual experience of students.

Local impact at Reading and Oxford Brookes

Reading

Subsequent to the findings of this project the University of Reading has pledged to the following:

- Update and overhaul of its Personal Tutor Handbook (hard copy and website) to include data and outputs from this project
- Additional staff development sessions tailored to personal tutoring, including an extra drop-in session for the PG Certification in Academic Practice
- One-stop shop intends to collect more user data for comparative purposes
- Gather more evaluation from students as to their experience of personal tutoring (in conjunction with the Students' Union)
- Use the student voice to better effect in staff development sessions (using video clips generated as project outputs)
- Maintain the Cluster Group network as far as is practicable given current HE climate; with the intention of ongoing collaborative work on retention and success with a focus on personal tutoring.
- To run a follow on seminar on personal tutoring in 2011/12 to build on the work of the seminar in 2010.
- The Project Manager will draft a paper for the Sub Committee on the Delivery and Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, with support from the Senior Tutor Community of Practitioners. This paper will focus on how Personal Tutors perceive the role, in terms of reward and recognition. It will contain a number of recommendations for further enhancement of practice at Reading, including:
 - Developing a competitive award for Personal Tutors; to recognise and reward excellence. This suggestion is supported by the PVC Learning and Teaching, Professor Rob Robson.

Oxford Brookes

- PASS tutorials are embedded in a compulsory Skills for Biosciences module that all Life Sciences' students take throughout their first year. Pro-active personal tutoring through PASS will continue as front-line support for first year students and since working relationships between staff and students were built in the first year, students continue to work with their tutors during the rest of their courses. New academic staff receive an induction into PASS and our tutorial system and issues pertaining to all staff are communicated through staff development events.
- The Head of Student Support runs a workshop for each cohort of Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education early career academics, covering student transition to university, student support structures, pro-active personal tutoring and pastoral support of students. She has run similar workshops for PGCHE courses at two other universities.
- In its campus redevelopment programme, Oxford Brookes is incorporating a one-stop shop for Student Services and study support within the new Student Centre building. This will provide integrated whole university support for students across the campus. PASS remains in Life Sciences and students needing specialist help will continue to be referred to professional help.

Impact beyond Reading and Oxford Brookes

This project has enabled those involved to add to existing expertise on student support and personal tutoring. For that we are extremely grateful. Dr Sue Robbins from Oxford Brookes has been invited by another institution to run staff development sessions there and is acting as an informal mentor whilst they redevelop their system of student support.

Impact and dissemination will be ongoing in terms of papers and conference attendance (see Appendix H: details of project dissemination). Members of our cluster group have committed to building upon the work they have started under their fellowships, for example Goldsmiths have committed to four extra workshops on student support. The models developed as part of the Cluster Group work have all been written up (see Appendix G for details) and most are easily transferable or can be adapted to suit local needs.

Issues of sustainability

Sustainability and future proofing are two elements which have to be given due consideration in any project. In terms of an embedded personal tutorial system such as across Reading and in the School of Life Sciences at Oxford Brookes, certain aspects become easier to sustain. These are that there is a named person to whom the tutors can go for support. At Reading this is taken one stage further with the Senior Tutor Community of Practitioners who bolster and support Personal Tutors.

At Reading and Oxford Brookes, expectations of staff are managed to a certain extent in that being a Personal Tutor is written into academic job descriptions and that there is an expectation that all undergraduate students will have a named Personal Tutor when they enter until they graduate.

Practical outputs and tools

In conjunction with this report, we have endeavoured to produce some practical outputs which can be used freely across the sector. We have taken our evidence and our findings and combined these to produce materials for colleagues and for students in the hope that our messages about what works can be taken and built upon.

These outputs include:

A short series of good practice guides to be shared across the sector. Titles include:

- Personal Tutoring – an information guide for senior managers
- Personal Tutoring – what's in it for me? A guide for staff
- Why it's important to get to know your personal tutor. A guide for students.
- Models of personal tutoring.

A short series of video clips, including:

- Current students at Reading
- Staff at Reading and Brookes
- Alumni from Reading
- Colleagues from other HEIs

Staff development session outlines:

We will produce session outlines which can be adapted and used across the sector.

The aforementioned video clips can be used in conjunction with these session plans.

Recommendations

Following our analysis of and reflection on our data and experiences across the three years of the project we suggest the following recommendations which may be useful for colleagues across the sector:

- We recommend PASS as a holistic model of support which could be transferred to different contexts. We suggest colleagues look at the elements of PASS and consider which might work best within their context.
- We recommend a one-stop shop approach to delivering student services on campus and via a physical and virtual helpdesk.
- We recommend that all students have access to a named Personal Tutor whilst they are undergraduates at university.
- We recommend that all support for students is easy for them to access in terms of physical access, ease of referral from others, ease of knowing who is

- available to help, transparent guidelines and boundaries and in terms of promotion and marketing information.
- We recommend contextualised study advice. The context could be school-based (as at Oxford Brookes) or centrally delivered but focused on the discipline (as at Reading).
 - We recommend that Personal Tutors receive more support from their institutions in terms of training and guidance materials but also in terms of reward and recognition.

Conclusions

What works for students and staff in the area of student retention and success will always be determined by a variety of factors, environments and perceptions.

In their SEDA paper Cook and Rushton (2008) put student retention into context by identifying some of the pitfalls which come up when looking in detail into this area. Indeed, retention is described as ‘to some extent a riddle’ (ibid, p.7) and highlight that attrition can be attributed in part to recruitment processes, institutional publicity and schools liaison which can promote unrealistic expectations of HE (ibid). Furthermore, students often enter HE unprepared and unengaged, which can further compound the issue of retention.

Clearly in the post Browne context focus on the student experience and retention and progression in particular will only become more important. What our data shows is that measuring the impact of certain interventions, services or relationships is intensely problematic when attempted in isolation. Simply put, we would not advocate trying to do so. There is a relational aspect to student support and personal tutoring. Acknowledging and working with this, is the only approach to take that will reap any truly useful results in terms of transferability.

It cannot be overstated how much the HE landscape has altered in the three years since this project began. That said, this project has demonstrated that it is both

possible and beneficial for two differing institutions to collaborate on project work. We have shown that we have been able to positively struggle to align outcomes and to identify what works for both of our institutions. We have learnt from each other and respect the different approaches adopted.

In terms of following up this work, the University of Reading is committed to the continual enhancement of its embedded support for students. Reading has decided to charge the full £9,000 student fees from 2012 and takes its responsibilities to provide a stimulating, challenging and supportive experience very seriously. Oxford Brookes is making major investment in a one-stop shop to provide accessible student services for all. The PASS system continues to run smoothly and efficiently in the School of Life Sciences and is recognised by the University as being of great value and benefit to the School.

In terms of what works for collaborative projects, we would advocate a critical friend and cluster group work and fellowships as appropriate. This approach has been adopted by Reading during several projects and has consistently proven useful. The small-scale fellowship model has worked particularly well and is an efficient use of resource. As an approach it tends to inspire others and is easily transferable to other settings.

In order that a positive and empowering self-help model of support can be developed from which all students can benefit, institutions are advised to concentrate not on the problems of the few to which solutions are often applied too late, but to proactively and transparently offer a joined-up system of support to all. Such a model could promote independence and self-help whilst being able to cope with students in crisis and those with special needs.

PASS at Oxford Brookes and the model of tutoring and student support at Reading have shown that investment in time and effort, with a little money can work wonders in terms of students feeling that they are able to realise their potential and make the

most of the many opportunities available to them in higher education. We would argue that both models are appropriate and adaptable for the 21st century.

As with most relationships, balance is everything and managing expectations on both sides is vital. Central support services and dedicated roles (Senior Tutors at Reading, Head of Student Support in the School of Life Science at Brookes) can help to mitigate potential difficulties. There is no short cut to establishing relationships. They require an investment of resources: time, energy and effort, but the pay-off is happily settled students who are engaged with the university and succeed academically.

Many factors affect student success and none operate in isolation. Retention and success will be enhanced when institutions successfully build on the myriad of naturally occurring relationships while people engage in higher education. Students matter. Institutions have a responsibility to those students. The findings of this project indicate that monitoring progress, communicating expectations, effectively managing relationships bolstered by robust personal tutorial systems and a transparent network of support services will ensure student success.

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