

# The HERE Project Toolkit

A resource for programme teams  
interested in improving student  
engagement and retention



**What Works?** Student Retention & Success

# Index

Introduction .....	p3
‘What Works? Student Retention & Success’ .....	p3
The HERE Project .....	p4
The HERE Project methodology & resources .....	p5
Doubting .....	p6
Persistence, continuation & retention .....	p6
How to use this toolkit .....	p7
The HERE Project recommendations .....	p8
Recommendation 1) Identify and respond to students at risk .....	p9
Recommendation 2) Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university ..	p13
Recommendation 3) Relationship and communication with staff .....	p17
Recommendation 4) Help students make more-informed decisions about choosing the right course in the first place .....	p22
Recommendation 5) Improve social integration .....	p25
Recommendation 6) Improve a sense of belonging to the programme .....	p30
Recommendation 7) Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can help them achieve their future goals .....	p34
Recommendation 8) Encourage students’ active engagement with the curriculum .....	p39
Recommendation 9) Ensure that there is good communication and access to additional student support .....	p44
Evaluation .....	p47
References .....	p48
The HERE Project Research Team .....	p51

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# Introduction to the HERE Project toolkit

Between 2008 & 2011, research teams from Nottingham Trent University, Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford explored two key themes associated with student retention as part of the 'What Works? Student Retention & Success' programme.

The teams looked at the impact of students' doubts (when strong enough to consider withdrawal) and the role that programme teams had on retention and engagement.

This toolkit was based on the evidence presented in the final project report in 2011. It is a resource developed for programme teams to review their own retention practices. Individual staff will also find it useful as will a range of professional, support and management colleagues.

The overriding message from our research is that there is no simple solution, no magic bullet, to retention. The programme teams we interviewed carried out many small scale interventions; you may already be doing some or all of them. However, this toolkit provides an opportunity for staff to reflect on their own practice and consider strategies for improving student retention and success.

The HERE Project team

February 2012

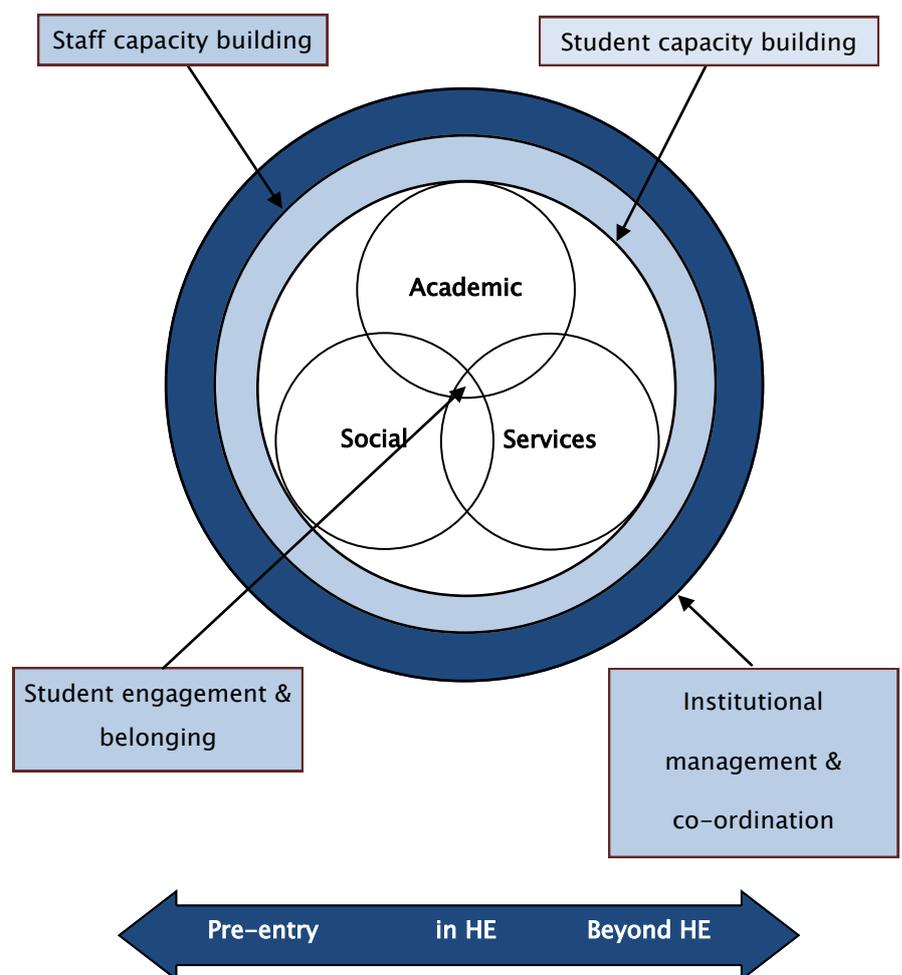
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## What Works? Student Retention & Success

The HERE Project is one of seven funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF). The seven projects, 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.

The Higher Education Academy's Widening Participation team has provided co-ordination for the seven projects and developed an overarching conceptual model.



Further information about all the projects involved in the 'What Works?' research can be found at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/retention-and-success>

# The Higher Education: Retention & Engagement (HERE) Project

Between 2008 & 2011, the HERE Project investigated first year student retention as part of the 'What Works? Student Retention & Success' programme. The HERE Project was delivered jointly by Nottingham Trent University, Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford. We believed that exploring retention & engagement together was important. At its most basic level, retention is a benchmark measure of engagement and our prior research into engagement suggested that factors associated with engagement would also be important to helping students to remain on their course of study.

The HERE team explored two themes associated with retention:

- The impact of doubting on students' decisions to persist
- The impact of individual programme teams on student retention

Further details about the HERE Project can be found at [www.HEREproject.org.uk](http://www.HEREproject.org.uk)

There is a fundamental difficulty writing a resource like this. At what level do we pitch our recommendations? Do we for instance write recommendations aimed at new lecturers or for those who are intimate with the retention literature? We have tried to use clear examples throughout to get around this problem. Nonetheless, you may find that you are familiar with much of what we offer in this toolkit.

HERE Project Key Findings	
In our study...	
1.	Approximately one third of first year students had experienced doubts sufficiently strong for them to consider withdrawing.
2.	Student doubters were more likely to leave than non-doubters
3.	Student doubters reported having a poorer quality university experience than non-doubters.
4.	Students usually had more than one reason for doubting.
5.	The primary reasons for doubting were associated with students' experience of the programme.
6.	The main reasons for staying were support from friends and family, adapting to the course/ university, student's personal commitment and drive and how the programme will help students achieve future goals, particularly employment.
7.	The primary times for doubting were immediately before and after Christmas. Very few respondents in our survey (conducted March – May 2011) had expressed doubts prior to starting university.
8.	Students reported differing degrees of doubt. Although, even amongst those with the strongest doubts, not all departed.
9.	Some student groups appear more likely to doubt than others.

If this is the case then either move on quickly, or use this opportunity to reflect. How could your practices be improved or barriers overcome? We have found that when we have

spoken to teaching staff in our own institutions about the toolkit, often what they have found most useful is the opportunity to take time to reflect on the headings and how they apply to their own practice.

# HERE Project methodology

The HERE Project used a mixed methods approach. Seven large scale surveys of first year students were conducted to explore students' experiences at university and factors associated with doubting. Sixty seven students were interviewed individually or in focus groups to provide richer details about their experiences. The progression of respondents was analysed to subsequently test the impact of doubting on retention.

The research findings were used to develop a series of audit tools. These were used with programme teams to explore their practices supporting first year students to succeed. Ten programmes were surveyed across the three institutions. These were programmes with either very high rates of retention or good rates of retention but were working with particular demographic groups, for example STEM subjects, or a high number of first generation in HE students.

Overall, it was clear that there was no single factor adopted by these programme teams that significantly influenced student retention. However, it appeared clear that:

- There were many small actions taking place that appeared to support student retention.
- Successful programmes were able to help students adapt to being effective learners in HE and created an environment in which students felt known, valued and part of a community.

## HERE Project Further Resources

We have produced a series of resource cards associated with this toolkit (see picture below for the cards in use). Each A5-sized card has one recommendation and associated key recommendations. These are designed to be conversation starters in staff meetings or development sessions. We envisaged that they would be valuable for anyone organising the

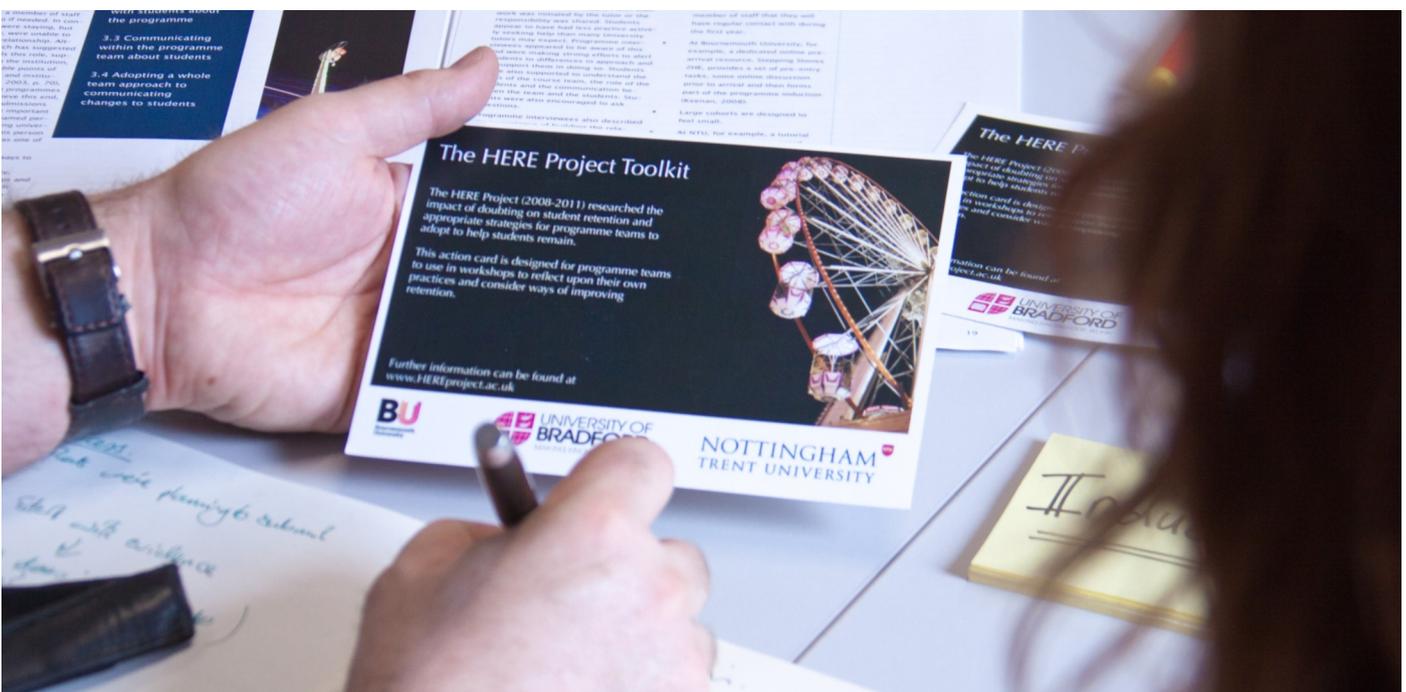
second stage (page 7) of the toolkit process. Our experience with staff in developing the toolkit suggests that the cards can really help push conversation forward. The cards can be downloaded from the HERE Project website [www.HEREproject.org.uk](http://www.HEREproject.org.uk)

We have deliberately kept the amount of detail about our findings to a minimum in this toolkit. You may be interested in reading part or all of the final report. Once again this can be found on the website.

We have written some of the programme audits as case studies. You may be interested to see more details about the views of the programme teams and students in the case studies on the website.

Copies of resources, presentations and reports can also be found on the HERE Project website. Please take a look at [www.HEREproject.org.uk](http://www.HEREproject.org.uk)

If you have any questions, then we would be happy to talk to you. Please email [ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk) for further information.



## The importance of doubting

We contend that doubting is a perfectly normal reaction to the change of circumstances most students encounter when starting a new university course. We therefore use the term ‘doubting’ to describe students who have doubts about being on the right course/ right university that are sufficiently strong to have considered withdrawal.

We found that approximately 1/3<sup>1</sup> of all survey respondents had doubts strong enough to have considered withdrawing at some point during the first year.

We would suggest that doubting is useful to those interested in retention for two reasons.

Firstly, there are many more student doubters than there are leavers. Our study appears to be in line with previous research into doubting. For example Rickinson & Rutherford (1995) found that 21% of students were doubters and Burrows (2010), 40%. Yet in the UK, around 10% of students withdraw from their course during the first year (NAO, 2007). Most doubters therefore do not become leavers. In the course of our study we believe that we have uncovered many of the factors that explain why this is so. Indeed the 9 sets of recommendations are largely based on the feedback we received from doubters who stayed.

Secondly, whilst there is extensive high quality research into student retention in the UK (for example Yorke & Longden 2004, Quinn et al. (2005), much of it has been conducted with students who have already withdrawn from their course and so there is a risk that their (often more negative) responses to researchers reflect post hoc rationalisation about their university experience. However, our findings suggest that many students who subsequently left actually had a more negative experience whilst studying on their course. This therefore appears to offer a useful point of triangulation with post withdrawal studies.

In our studies doubters reported:

- A less satisfactory academic experience.
- Lower levels of understanding about the differences between FE & HE.
- Lower levels of confidence
- Being more likely to be working ‘very hard’ or ‘not very hard at all’.
- That they were more likely to be struggling with their studies and less confident about asking for help (although in the event, were more likely to actually ask for it).
- That they were less likely to be enjoying their studies.

## Persistence, continuation & retention

Our research showed that doubters were more likely to withdraw early when compared to non-doubters. When we tracked the progress of the March—May 2009 survey respondents, 8% of doubters had withdrawn by December 2009, whereas only 2% of non-doubters had done so. In other words 98% of non-doubters had continued into their second year whereas only 92% of doubters had done so. Most of these students had progressed to the second year, however, some had transferred to other courses or were repeating parts, or all, of the first year. We have therefore used the terms ‘persisted’ and ‘continued’ interchangeably to refer to students who are still retained on their course as we cannot always say that students had ‘progressed’.

Even amongst students who have withdrawn, it appears likely that many will return to higher education somewhere. Yorke et al. (1997) found that when surveyed 75% of withdrawn students had either already restarted on a higher education course or were planning to do so. However, our interest is in how individual institutions can optimise student retention and minimise the distress for individual students associated with early withdrawal.

<sup>1</sup> 37% of all respondents were doubters in the 2009 survey (n=873), 32% in 2011 (n=1,063).

# How to use this toolkit

We suggest that the recommendations in this toolkit are best explored as part of a team development process, such as a meeting or away day. Nonetheless an interested individual will find plenty that is useful to reflect upon if they work through the toolkit on their own.

Each of the nine recommendations contains a set of suggested actions for the user to consider implementing.

They arise from:

- Data gathered during the HERE Project from students or tutors.
- Information from retention or learning and teaching research.
- The experience of the HERE Project team working with first year students in a range of roles.

We do not recommend that you unthinkingly follow the recommendations listed, but instead reflect upon

the themes and issues they raise. It may not be possible to implement the ideas in your setting, but could you do something different that achieves the same result? The ten programmes we audited used a range of different approaches to support their students: we suggest you reflect on ways of implementing ideas in the most relevant way for your particular context.

We have left plenty of spaces for you to make notes throughout the toolkit, please do use them.

## Step 1

Take stock of the situation by looking at Recommendation 1 'identifying students at risk'

What data do you currently possess about retention? Is retention a problem for all students, or a specific group (for example, repeating students)? What do you want to achieve from the exercise? Are you looking to achieve a specific target (such as increasing retention by a certain amount) or creating a more engaging student learning environment?

This stage might be most productively done by one individual such as the programme leader and the information gathered from it discussed at the start of the meeting in step 2.

## Step 2

Discuss Recommendations 2 'student transition' and 5 'social integration'

We suggest that you do this as part of a team meeting or away day and allocate a few hours to discuss the themes and make plans. The toolkit discussion cards may be a useful way to engage the team.

We suggest starting with these two recommendations as they deal with some of the most potent and far-reaching themes we encountered.

By the end of the meeting we recommend that the team have created an action plan for identifying students at risk, supporting student transition and social integration.

## Step 3

Reviewing your actions and consider further recommendations

We recommend that you agree to have at least one review meeting as part of the action plan in stage 2. It may be appropriate to review within a few months of starting to make changes and at the end of the academic year.

- What changes were you able to implement?
- What impact did they appear to have on retention or student engagement?
- What would you do differently next time?

At this point, you can revisit the toolkit and consider other areas.

# HERE Project toolkit Recommendations

Recommendation 1..... Page 9

**Identify and respond to students at risk**

Recommendation 2..... Page 13

**Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university**

Recommendation 3..... Page 17

**Relationship and communication with staff**

Recommendation 4..... Page 22

**Help students make more-informed decisions about choosing the right course in the first place**

Recommendation 5..... Page 25

**Improve social integration**

Recommendation 6..... Page 30

**Improve a sense of belonging to the programme**

Recommendation 7..... Page 34

**Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can help them achieve their future goals**

Recommendation 8..... Page 39

**Encourage students' active engagement with the curriculum**

Recommendation 9..... Page 44

**Ensure that there is good communication about and access to additional student support**

# Recommendation 1

## Identify and respond to students at risk

The 2007 National Audit Office report 'Staying the Course' found that some student groups were more likely to leave than others. These included:

- Students with lower entry qualifications
- Part-time students
- Students on some STEM subjects
- Male students
- Students from low participation postcodes/ lower socio-economic classifications
- Students with disabilities

These factors increase the risk, but clearly do not provide the whole picture. For example, one US study, (Kuh et al. 2008) found that the strongest influence on persistence was prior academic attainment. However, the second factor was student engagement: the extent to which students were engaged in academically purposeful activities. Tinto (1997) in a smaller study found that student engagement was actually a stronger predictor of persistence than prior attainment. US studies such as Tinto (1993) argue that retention is a consequence of students becoming integrated (later described as 'engaged' (Tinto, 2006)) into the institution. This integration comes about through the interplay of students' prior experiences, their goals and the institutional environment (also see Pascarella, 1985 and Astin, 1993). In the UK, Thomas (2002) and Quinn et al. (2005) both suggest that some student groups may find it harder to interpret the institution's underlying environment (habitus) and thus

may be at a disadvantage when making that transition.

The evidence appears to suggest that whilst some groups are more at risk of withdrawing early, there is much that can be done to support students to stay by creating a learning experience appropriate to their needs. One practice common to many of the programmes in the HERE Project study was that they had a good understanding of the issues that affected their students' retention, they knew their students personally and had put in place strategies to respond to students' needs by using this data.

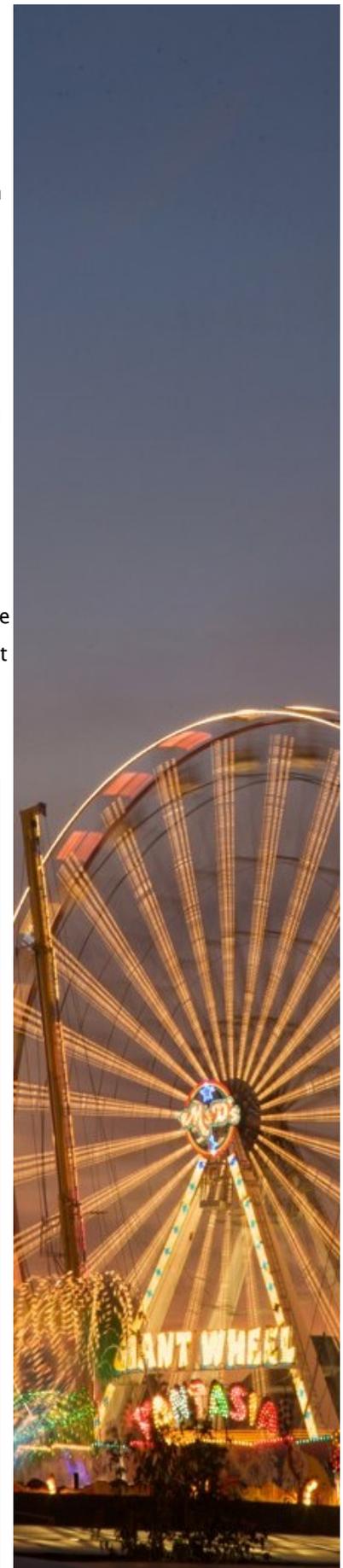
We therefore recommend that programme teams identify and respond to students at risk by:

1.1 Understanding more about students at risk of withdrawing early

1.2 Monitoring 'at risk' times

1.3 Monitoring engagement, not just attendance

1.4 Responding to students at risk



## 1.1 Understanding more about students at risk of withdrawing early

There are broadly two sources of data on student withdrawals: formal and informal. We suggest programme teams ensure that they learn from both.

### Formal data

Whilst all institutions dedicate time and energy to gathering and reviewing data about students' experiences at university, Yorke notes that "Experience suggests that data gathered to fulfil quality assurance obligations are not always exploited optimally for the purposes of quality enhancement: in other words, the 'quality loop' is not always closed" Yorke (2006, p208). Institutional data can be difficult to use effectively, Buglear (2009) notes that there are often differences between the date a student informs the university that they have withdrawn and their last log-ins to university IT systems. In two of the case studies, the programme teams were part of an initiative developed to better exploit student records for retention management purposes. Furthermore one programme also kept additional information about student withdrawal gathered within the team to give a more complete picture when retention was discussed periodically throughout the year.

We recommend:

- Reviewing how institutional retention data is processed.
  - Does it provide data useful for programme level retention management purposes?

- If not what else needs to take place?
- Ensuring that the whole programme team understands the current position with regards to student retention.
- Considering gathering data at faculty/school level, even if only to provide greater details when discussing institutional withdrawals data.

### Informal data

In our programme audits, it was very apparent that even in large programmes, the staff team made a real effort to know the students personally. Furthermore, student feedback suggested that being known was an important factor for retention, for example one doubter reported being reassured when "*My lecturer for the previous module, she approached me at the end of one class when she thought I looked worried and concerned*". (NTU programme student survey). In our case studies, better personal relationships with students also helped staff to spot students at risk, or provide a valuable perspective on institutional data for the purposes of reviewing data and planning subsequent strategies. One of our case study programmes specifically built discussions about retention & progression into their team meetings and this was felt to provide a useful opportunity to share observations about students and plan appropriate interventions.

We recommend:

- Placing more emphasis on building personal relationships with first year students. In most institutions this is likely to require

allocating more resources into the first year (Yorke & Thomas 2003).

- Making sure that there is communication within the team regarding students at risk of withdrawing.
- Allocating time to review both the formal and informal withdrawals data.
  - Were there warning signs? Does the team know why the particular student withdrew? Was there anything practical that could have been done to prevent withdrawal?

## 1.2 Monitoring 'at risk' times

In the UK, student withdrawal tends to be highest in the first year. At this time students face all the anxieties of the new experience, but haven't yet developed the support structures or really begun to engage with the new learning experience. Fitzgibbon & Prior (2007) noted that students' needs changed over the course of the first year. For example early on, students need help orienting themselves to the campus, later on orientating to their assessments and sources of support.

Roberts et al. (2003) noted that the times students were most likely to consider leaving were the first term and in the summer prior to starting the second year. However, the HERE Project noted that students were most likely to have doubts in the period immediately

before and after Christmas. We would suggest that this time period is at the point where students tend to have their first significant block of assessment and also potentially suffer from the 'January blues'. The reasons for doubting also changed over time: student lifestyle anxieties were more prevalent early in the academic year and the prevalence of academic reasons for doubting became overwhelming as the year progressed.

For the case studies, we asked students to report when they felt most committed to their course. At NTU, the two programmes we used as case studies were in the same academic school. Students on one programme reported being most committed at the time of the survey, (Summer term) as they were preparing for exams and completing the final assignments for the year, they reported enjoying the fact that they were drawing together the different threads they had been studying. Students on the other programme, however, were more likely to be committed at the very start of the year, seemingly reflecting real anxieties about coping as the year progressed.

We would suggest that although there are likely to be patterns and shared experiences, there will be considerable variation and that programme teams will often be the best placed to know and respond to these issues.

We recommend:

- Programme teams consider the at risk times for their courses and plan appropriate strategies to ease the transition or help new students to cope.

### 1.3 Monitoring engagement, not just attendance

One effective strategy used by programmes audited by the HERE Project was a comprehensive attendance policy. Its aim was *“picking people up who might have problems who wouldn’t necessarily have come forward”* (UoB staff interview). It was coordinated by a team member who reported that *“we keep a tight record of attendance ... it’s difficult for them to disappear ... we are looking out for issues”* (UoB staff interview). Students were aware of this policy and, in the programme surveys, positive comments included: *very useful, a motivator’*.

A second strategy used elsewhere was to review non-submission and contact the student immediately, rather than waiting for exam boards at the end of the year.

We recommend:

- Programme teams monitor engagement as well as attendance and respond quickly to students who appear to be disengaging.
- Clearly this is resource intensive and needs balancing against other priorities, it also raises philosophical issues about the nature of independent learning. We would therefore suggest that the programme team is explicit with students about following up disengagement. For example, it may be that disengagement is pursued until the end of the first term, or first year only.

### 1.4 Responding to students at risk

If we are to follow the logic of Yorke’s (2006) quote about using data to bring about quality enhancement, it’s important that any process looking at students at risk also includes an action plan to respond to students’ immediate needs and subsequently plans to prevent or mitigate against future problems as far as possible. In the HERE Project case studies, different programmes adopted different strategies for moving students on to additional support such as writing and maths specialists or dyslexia experts. One case study programme used a Director of Studies/ integrated pastoral role who was not only a resource to students, but also provided feedback for the programme and made recommendations for future developments.

We recommend:

- As part of the normal quality control process, programme teams ensure that they monitor and review student retention, but also use resources such as the HERE Project toolkit to consider strategies for improving student retention.
- Working with a different programme to exchange ideas about improving retention and having a ‘safe’ partner to discuss approaches.
- Looking for patterns and responding quickly. For example, is there a particular module that is problematic? Is maths a particular problem?

# Recommendation 2

## Help students to make the transition to being effective learners at university

In 2009, the HERE Project team asked students to identify their priorities at university. As might be expected, 'academic studies' was the highest priority. In this light it is understandable that the most frequently-cited reason for considering withdrawing also related to 'academic studies'. It appears whilst other factors did cause students to doubt, having doubts about the programme of study was an altogether more significant problem.

There were also a number of differences between doubters and their non-doubting peers about their academic experience. For example, doubters were less likely to report feeling confident about their ability to cope with their studies. When tested against 17 student experience factors, the factor most closely associated with confidence was whether or not students reported that their feedback was useful. Those who found feedback useful were less likely to doubt than those who did not. It may be that doubters had tutors who provided genuinely less useful feedback, however, it is our argument that doubters had less successfully adapted to higher education and so were struggling to understand the different nature of feedback in HE. There are other instances in which doubters appeared less aware of these differences between further and higher education. For example, doubters reported being less aware of the differences between FE and HE and that it was less likely that anyone had actually explained what these differences were.

When academic achievement was tested in one of the partner institutions, doubters achieved lower grades at the end of the first year. In 2011, we tested the relationship between UCAS points and doubting. The evidence was inconclusive and many students with high

UCAS points expressed doubts. We will however review these findings combined with progression data (2012). Doubters also reported that they were more likely to have struggled with aspects of their course and were less confident about asking for help from tutors. Throughout our study, doubters tended to report feeling more distant from their tutors and less likely to feel known by the teaching team.

We therefore recommend that programme teams help students to make the transition to HE by considering the following:

2.1 Improving students' understanding about how HE is different to prior learning

2.2 Creating an environment conducive to peer support

2.3 Improving students' understanding of assessment

2.4 Making better use of formative feedback

2.5 Considering differentiation



## 2.1 Improving students' understanding about how HE is different to prior learning

Transitions from college to university can be particularly challenging based on a range of factors, for example Banning (1989) noted that the greater the difference between the sending college and receiving university, there is a greater potential for personal development, but also a higher risk of the transition being difficult. Foster, Bell & Salzano (2008) and Foster, Lawther & McNeil (2011) reported that there are significant differences between students' experiences of college and the first year at university. These studies found major differences between the use of feedback, deadlines, relationships with staff, approaches to taking notes and independent learning.

Moreover, students often have vague expectations about what to expect. There appeared to be an appreciation that there will be more independent learning, but there was little understanding about what that means. Both Tahir (2008) and Jessen & Elander (2009) reported that students at college over-estimated their preparedness for studying at university. Cook and Leckey (1999) and Bryson & Hardy (forthcoming) report that students often continue to utilise approaches to study learnt in school and college and fail to adapt them to learning at university. Students may experience confusion as the practices in HE appear to be "the same game", but with "different rules" (Leask, 2006, p. 191).

The findings from the HERE Project directly contributed to the development of a more comprehensive tutorial programme at NTU. The focus of the tutorials has been to help students to manage both the social and academic transition to university. The tutorials are specifically intended to create opportunities for students to reflect upon the

issues associated with becoming members of a community of practice within their discipline and consider their own academic performance and expectations in that light. The structure explicitly draws upon models defined by Tinto (1993), Fitzgibbon & Prior (2007), Cook & Rushton (2008) and stresses the importance of gradually developing awareness and capability to learn effectively over the course of the first year in a safe friendly environment.

We recommend:

- Programme teams review their induction practice.
  - Do inductions start to both explain and provide an opportunity for students to practice the skills and approaches needed to cope with learning at university? See NTU's [Induction Guide](#) for one example.
  - Do inductions have an input from existing students to help newcomers understand the differences between FE & HE?
- Periodically including discussion about appropriate approaches to study whilst students are actually practising that skill. For example, reviewing approaches to note making in lectures.
- Use of tutorials to formally discuss and practise appropriate academic strategies.

## 2.2 Creating an environment conducive to peer support

In 2009, the most important reason cited by doubters at all three institutions for staying at university was support from friends and family. At Nottingham Trent University when 'support from family and friends' was further subdivided, 'friends made at university' was the most important single group. In the 2011 survey, student doubters were also less likely to report that their course is friendly.

Bournemouth University makes extensive use of [Peer Assisted Learning](#) (PAL) programmes. These were felt to help create a supportive environment in which students could ask for help. For example, one student commented "*I understand the topics I have to do my coursework on and I know that if I don't, I can ask for guidance from my lecturers and PAL leader*" (BU Student Transition Survey).

We recommend that:

- Programme teams build small group activity to the curriculum, particularly in the first term, and ensure that ice breakers and other structured social activities are built into the induction and early transition period (Cook & Rushton, 2008).
- Programmes explore using student buddies or peer mentors to support students, particularly early in the academic year. Of the two, peer mentoring is a more formal process that follows the curriculum, and buddying tends to be less formal. However, if you are using buddies, we would strongly suggest that they deliver timetabled activities such as campus tours to create a reason to speak to students in the first place.

## 2.3 Improving students' understanding of assessment

In 2009, we asked students whether their assessment was as they expected it to be. Only one third of doubting students felt that this was the case; two thirds of non-doubters felt the same way. It appears that just as doubters have a less clear understanding of the nature of higher education, they also have a less clear understanding of assessment practices within it.

We recommend that:

- Programmes use activities that explicitly explore expectations about assessment in higher education. These might include:
  - Analysis of elements of previous students' assignments
  - Staged construction of assignments, for example writing a literature review, discussing it in class and then using the feedback to shape the full assignment
  - Discussions about assessment criteria and disciplinary language/ phrases (for example what does 'be more critical' actually mean).

## 2.4 Making better use of formative feedback

As we have already suggested, there appears to be a strong association between confidence and the perceived usefulness of feedback. In addition to offering developmental advice, feedback can also offer reassurance to students that they are coping: *“At the beginning of the course I was a bit overwhelmed by the amount of people who were clearly very smart and I found myself questioning my own academic abilities. After completing my first few assignments I convinced myself I hadn't done very well but I got good marks throughout the year as well as very detailed feedback so I was able to improve my work”* (NTU Student Transition Survey).

Yorke (2003) argues that formative feedback can play a crucial role in helping new students form a greater understanding about their learning environment. However, Foster, McNeil & Lawther (forthcoming) note that whilst students appear to understand the role of formative feedback and make sense of feedback at the point they receive it, they are often not good at subsequently using it.

We recommend:

- Using formative feedback, particularly early in the first year to offer diagnostic advice to students.
- Where possible tying discussion and action planning from formative feedback into tutorials throughout the year.

## 2.5 Considering differentiation

We note that those students who were finding their work difficult were more

likely to be doubters. Similarly, when asked about how hard they were working, those at the extreme ends were more likely to have doubts. Working 'not much at all' or 'very hard' appeared to make students more likely to doubt. Higher education ought to offer opportunities to challenge and stretch students (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). However with over 40% of all young people entering HE in the UK, is there a need to consider structuring learning, teaching and support around differing levels of ability? Of course, if students feel that they are in the remedial group, this may have a negative impact on their performance, nonetheless we feel this is a valuable mental exercise for teams to consider.

We recommend:

- At least discussing options for structuring groups around their academic performance. It may be that this is useful for certain subjects that students can find difficult.
- Programmes devise ways to encourage students throughout the year. One programme, for example, highlighted student achievements in the university magazine and promoted this to first years; another sent letters of commendation to students who do well in the first year. A programme at NTU publishes all dissertations that receive a first in the departmental internet journal.
- One example suggested to the HERE Project researchers is that all students on a programme are required to attend a timetabled weekly maths session unless they can complete and pass an online assessment on the VLE. This way, those who don't need the additional support can focus elsewhere and those who need it can participate in smaller groups.

# Recommendation 3

## Relationship and communication with staff

A recurring theme throughout the HERE Project was that students wanted to feel known by an academic member of staff. In the focus groups, student doubters were less likely to report having a member of staff to go to than non-doubters. Importantly, for some students, contact with a member of academic staff was cited as a reason to stay. For example, this student doubter who subsequently described, “*This period of crisis where I didn't really know what to do and if I was managing with my studies, I guess getting that tutor support... that kind of broke some barriers that I had in my head*” (University of Bradford Student Interview). Research by Yorke and Longden suggests that this is becoming increasingly important. In their large multi-institutional studies of the first year, they found that the fifth strongest reason for withdrawal was the amount of personal contact time with academic staff (Yorke & Longden, 2008, p. 41), and that “there were some hints that the issue of contact with academic staff was becoming more significant for continuation” (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p. 2). Students who had had doubts about being at university were also more likely to rate ‘*feeling valued by teaching staff*’, ‘*lecturers being accessible*’ and ‘*knowing where to go if they had a problem*’ as more important than non-doubters. Student doubters were, however, less likely to report that they had had a positive experience of these factors.

So what is it that makes students feel valued? Thomas reports that students “seem more likely to feel that they are accepted and valued by staff if lecturers and tutors know their names and exhibit other signs of friendship, are interested in their work and treat students as equals” (2002, p. 432). Thomas suggests that the benefits of a close

relationship with staff are that students are more likely to develop an understanding of the institutional habitus, and that a close relationship between students and staff minimizes “the social and academic distance between them...[which]...enable[s] students to feel valued and sufficiently confident to seek guidance when they require it” (ibid, p. 439). They are more likely “..to take problems to staff, and thus sort them out” (ibid, p. 432). Analysis of the 2009 Nottingham Trent University Student Transition Survey supports this link between feeling valued by staff and increased confidence about coping with studies. The HERE Project qualitative findings also suggest that having an individual academic who is personally interested in students can make a profound difference to their confidence about seeking help.

For example, one student doubter explained that being able to access a tutor had helped them to stay. “*I see him quite often even if I just bump into him and he asks me if everything is going OK. If I've got any problems I always go and see him ... so it's been good*” (NTU Student Focus Group).

Interviews with students revealed the importance of a relationship with at least one member of staff. A strong theme among non-doubters and students who had previously doubted but now felt positive about staying was that they could describe a member of staff that they could go to if needed. In contrast, doubters who were staying, but somewhat reluctantly, were unable to report having such a relationship. Although previous research has suggested the personal tutor fulfils this role, supporting integration with the institution, acting as “one of the stable points of contact between student and institution” (Yorke and Thomas, 2003, p. 70),

it was found that different programmes used different roles to achieve this end, including year tutors and admissions tutors. What appeared to be important was that students met this named person in the first week of starting university and had easy access to this person during the year, for example, as one of their module tutors.

Furthermore, the first of Chickering & Gamson's (1987) principles of good practice in undergraduate education is that it encourages contact between students and faculty. Being known in the faculty not only supports students to stay, but also helps stretch them academically. Thus we would recommend that programmes are structured to allow students the opportunity to 'feel known' by at least one member of staff and that this contact is continued throughout the first year to support students through transition and to support attachment to their new learning environment (Percy, 2002, p. 97). This may be more challenging for larger cohorts, whose size when coupled with traditional methods of teaching such as large lectures, can leave students feeling isolated (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p. 26). The challenge is to "encourage a perception of smallness" (ibid, 2008, p. 50). Programmes devised different ways to encourage a perception of 'smallness' and intimacy. For example, using tutor groups and weekly workshop sessions in which students were expected to work together in teams.

Programme interviewees described the importance of helping students to understand the structure and roles of the course team. They also emphasised the benefit of clear communication within the team about individual students that may be having problems with the course. In addition, both staff and students reported on the importance of allowing clear communication from students to the course team about any issues that may arise.

We therefore recommend that pro-

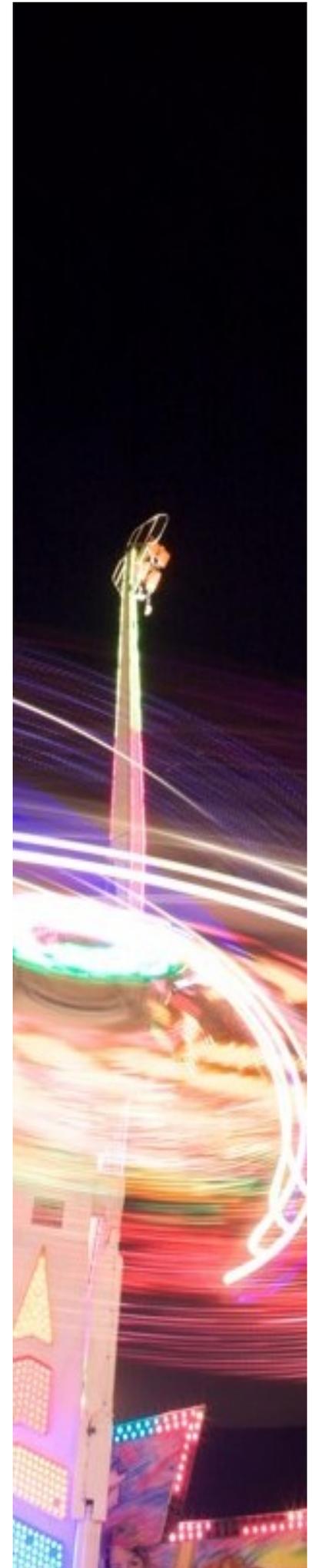
gramme teams enhance relationship and communication with staff by:

3.1 Enhancing the staff/student relationship

3.2 Communicating with students about the programme

3.3 Communicating within the programme team about students

3.4 Adopting a whole team approach to communicating changes to students



## 3.1 Enhancing the staff/student relationship

Students may need support to make the transition to a different kind of staff/student relationship in higher education. Foster, Lawther and McNeil (2010) found that students had often come from an environment in college where they had experienced a close personal relationship with a supportive tutor in which often support with their work was initiated by the tutor or the responsibility was shared. Students appear to have had less practice actively seeking help than many university tutors may expect. Programme interviewees appeared to be aware of this and were making strong efforts to alert students to differences in approach and to support them in doing so. Students were also supported to understand the roles of the course team, the role of the students and the communication between the team and the students. Students were also encouraged to ask questions.

Programme interviewees also described the importance of building the relationship with students as early as possible. This was done through communications prior to the first week, early face to face meetings during induction and opportunities for both formal and informal contact with students throughout the year. These actions supported the feeling of being “welcomed”, that has been found to be one of the factors that is “crucial to successful transition” (Pargetter et al., 1998).

We would recommend that:

- Students are given the opportunity to understand how the relationship with University staff may differ from their previous experience and supported with this new way of learning.
  - One programme, for example, use a learning contract to

establish a partnership with the students. The students (as a group) design a learning contract during a study skills session with the support of their Year Tutor and this is then circulated to the course team.

- Students have early communication from a member of the course team, prior to arrival if possible, and a face to face meeting during the first week with a member of staff that they will have regular contact with during the first year.
  - At Bournemouth University, for example, a dedicated online pre-arrival resource, Stepping Stones 2HE, provides a set of pre-entry tasks, some online discussion prior to arrival and then forms part of the programme induction (Keenan, 2008).
- Large cohorts are designed to feel small.
  - At NTU, for example, a tutorial system is being implemented. The system is designed to help students manage the transition to HE, develop appropriate strategies and importantly build a close relationship between a tutor and a tutor group of 8 – 12 students.
- Students have the opportunity to contact staff other than their personal tutor. A well-publicised open door policy allows students to contact staff they feel comfortable with, if not their allocated tutor.

## 3.2 Communicating with students about the programme

Doubters were more likely to report feeling that the course was disorganised than their non-doubting peers. This included communication about the course as a whole as well as information about changes during the first year, such as timetable changes, placements and module choices. Comments from student doubters appear to suggest that whilst electronic communication is valuable, personal contact is much more important. Programme teams highlighted the importance of using a number of different methods of communication. One programme for example, with a high number of widening participation students described the importance of communication by letter during the summer about resit dates because some students may have limited access to email.

It appeared important to students that they understood how the programme team worked together, their different roles and the systems they use. Programme interviewees also described the importance of clear communication within the team, that systems are made transparent both within the team but also made transparent to the students. Doubters in particular appear to need more assistance to understand the nature of higher education and their relationship with staff. Therefore it is particularly important that the whole team communicates to them consistently and effectively.

Programme interviewees also described the importance of a whole team approach to supporting student transition to the first year. It is, as Pargetter et al (1998), argue, important that “transition is ‘owned’ as an issue and a challenge within departments, centres and faculties, and not just by the institution as a whole”.

We recommend that:

- The programme adopts a whole team approach to retention and

transition which includes roles for academic, administrative and support staff.

- The structure of the course team and outlying support is communicated clearly to the students early in the year. In our study examples included:
  - Explaining the roles of the course team during an induction session.
  - Putting up photos of the course team to help personalise the team.
  - Directing students to a webpage outlining the course team, their roles and further sources of support
  - Using a ‘hierarchy of support’ document that explains what to do/where to go with a problem.
  - Programme social events.
- Course systems are communicated to students, for example, the exam board process and the referrals process.
  - Students in one programme, for example, had access to a Director of Studies Stage 1 /first year tutor role. A core part of this role is to act as a focal point for students, to support them with day to day issues and to looking out for individual problems. Students are explicitly told of their role from the start and directed to see them with appropriate issues, or they can act as a first port of call for any issues.
- Changes that take place within the course, for example to the timetable or information about placements are communicated to students clearly and in a variety of ways.
  - Programmes used a regular news bulletin, the VLE, department website, emails and social media for other ‘just in time’ information.

### 3.3 Communicating within the programme team about students

The HERE Programme research found that communication within the course team about individual students was useful to identify students 'at risk'. This allowed the team to discuss whether a particular student's non-attendance or poor engagement for example was an issue for one module or a pattern across the course.

*"...a feature of the team and the way in which the team supports the student is an intimacy so ... we make the efforts to get to know the students. Conversations will take place amongst the team about the students and their progress and that is a regular part of what we do"* (NTU Staff Interview).

We recommend that:

- Time is set aside for formal communication about retention and engagement issues and to discuss any student's issues with each other confidentially and in-depth.
- Staff time is allocated to support this, for example, to check performance and progress across the programme.
- Regular informal opportunities are used to discuss students, for example, at the beginning and end of meetings.

### 3.4 Adopting a whole team approach to communicating changes to students

Students surveyed during the programme research described the importance of staff being responsive to their suggestions about improvements to the course and taking the time to report back about any changes that had been made. Staff reported that this helped to build relationships with the students and was most effective when students were given time within the curriculum to do this.

We recommend that:

- Programme teams reinforce the importance to students of using the opportunities provided for student feedback.
- Notes and actions are well publicised and that students are aware of any outcomes or changes to illustrate that their views are being acknowledged, valued and acted upon. Programmes also found it useful to explain why some issues could not be addressed if this was the case.
- Students are encouraged to give informal feedback to staff during the year and that this feedback is communicated to the course team.

# Recommendation 4

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

We would argue that there is an inherent tension at the heart of the recruitment process. Universities and academic programmes need to promote a vibrant, positive environment full of opportunities for students to thrive. The reality of learning at university does of course contain many such opportunities, but also many hours spent with challenging or frustrating texts, difficult assignments and group projects with sometimes difficult peers (Purnell & Foster, 2008). Furthermore, how does one explain what a lecture, or independent learning will be like to a student who has only very limited experiences of such learning? As we have reported earlier, students are often unclear about how university will be different and are over-confident about how well prepared they are for studying independently.

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

Doubters found the material provided by the institution prior to arrival less accurate than their non-doubting peers. For example at UoB in 2009, 24.7% (24 out of 97) of students who

thought that information received from the university was accurate had considered withdrawing; whereas 37.5% (3 out of 8) of students who did not think that the information was accurate had doubts. Whilst some of this information may have been inaccurate, it also appears likely that, for whatever reason, student doubters had more difficulty interpreting it. Quinn et al (2005) reported that some students may lack the cultural capital to interpret university messages about what the learning experience will be like. One participant in the 2008 UK National Student Forum reported that *"I needed more detail on how I would be taught and the course content. And also the learning support that would be available. What are the expectations around essay writing for example? It's a big cultural shift"* (NSF, 2008, p. 12).

Yorke and Longden (2008, p. 13) refer to the importance of articulating 'the deal' between the institution and the student so that students have a greater chance to understand what to expect from their course/university along with any limitations. From 2012 onwards UK universities will be required to provide Key Information Sets (KIS) to potential students, but even if these provide succinct and clear information about the learning experience, it is far from clear that students will be able to develop a meaningful understanding of what the experience will be like.

One BU student doubter felt that they had not sufficiently prepared for the process of applying for university and had therefore not been able to fully comprehend the information made available to them. They offered the following advice to potential students: *"I think do as much research as you can*

... Try to get as much information as you can about your actual course. Try to visit the uni ... Try to find out information from them to determine whether it's the right course and university for you ... because if you feel like you're not going to do as well as you could do, or you feel like it's not the right place or the right time to go to university, then you're not going to do as well as you could do ... if your heart's not in it you'll probably find yourself struggling or dropping out" (BU Student Interview).

We therefore recommend that programme teams help students to make more informed decisions by:

#### 4.1 Considering the use of open days and other communication channels

#### 4.2 Providing a range of information to students prior to starting their programme

### 4.1 Considering the use of open days and other communication channels

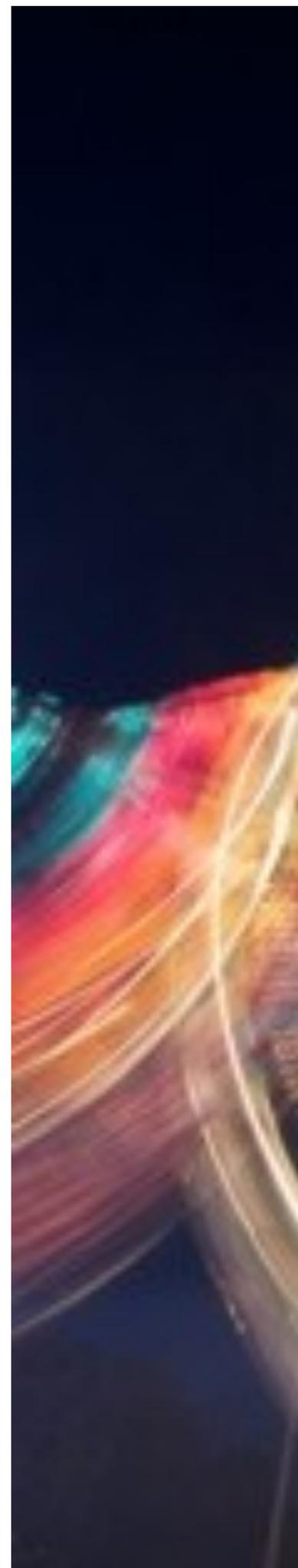
The National Audit Office recommended that student achievement could be improved through the use of Open days. "Open days, including lectures and opportunities to talk to current students, are critical in helping students understand what the course is about, and what they could expect to do during the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

However, the evidence about this aspect was often contradictory. Tutors and non-doubting students felt very strongly that open days and marketing materials had a powerfully beneficial impact upon helping students choose the right course. One NTU tutor commented that "*I would say seven out of ten who want to withdraw... are the people who didn't come to open days*" (NTU Staff Interview). However in our study, those students who attended open days were just as likely to be doubters as those who had not.

Clearly, we are not suggesting that open days have no value, but that there is a difficult balance to strike in such promotional events and some students appear to have difficulty meaningfully interpreting the event.

We recommend:

- Reviewing the extent to which marketing messages are moderated by information about the actual learning and teaching experience. Open days are promotional events, so naturally most institutions will use the oppor-



tunity to promote the positive and the exciting. This may not be the correct environment to talk about the more challenging aspects of the course, or even more mundane matters such as the reality of independent learning.

- Checking the content of marketing materials with first year students. Were there any aspects they felt were unclear, or even misleading about the learning experience? If so, explore ways of better balancing the promotional messages with the reality of actually being a student.

## 4.2 Providing a range of information to students prior to starting their programme

Open days are probably not the right environment to start a discussion about the more challenging aspects of studying at university. We would however suggest that this discussion starts before students arrive at university through programmes such as Stepping Stones 2HE (Keenan, 2008). In 2011, NTU ensured that all programmes had an online presence so that students could find out more about their learning and teaching before they arrived on campus. These pages included information about learning and teaching and pre-induction activities.

In 2011, the University of Leeds launched an online resource for students to visit in the weeks between the release of the A level results and the start of university. [Flying Start](#) featured a succession of videos of structured conversations between students about different aspects of studying and further support resources tied to the disciplines. We would suggest that pre-entry communication about learning at university plays an important part of the starting at university process.

We recommend:

- Making information more generally available about what learning is actually like at each institution/ on your particular programme so that students can access it whilst thinking about university.
- Providing more targeted communication about what to expect in the period between a final offer being made and students starting university. Tie this work into the early part of the first year curriculum.

# Recommendation 5

## Improve social integration

Social integration appears to be an important factor in retention. Yorke & Longden (2008, p. 4) recommend 'treating the curriculum as an academic milieu, and also one in which social engagement is fostered'. In Tinto's retention model (1993) engagement within the social environment is treated equally to engagement within the academic environment. In the 2011 HERE Project surveys, those students who had never considered leaving reported a larger circle of friends than their doubting peers. They also reported that their course was friendlier.

The HERE Project found in the 2009 surveys, that the most frequently reported reason for staying cited by doubters was 'friends and family'. For example *"my new friends have been able to help me get through many hardships, so they are part of the reason why I have been able to stay"* (University of Bradford Student Transition Survey). At Nottingham Trent University when 'support from family and friends' was further subdivided, 'friends made at university' was the most important single group.

However, the role of friendship appears to be a complex one. Despite being the most frequently cited reason for staying in the qualitative responses, friendship appeared very undervalued by students. For example, students only rated the actual importance of friendships 13<sup>th</sup> of the 17 Student Experience Factors. Only 68% of all students at NTU reported that it was important; interestingly, 70% of NTU respondents reported that their peers actually were supportive. In 2011, students were invited to report which Student Experience Factors had helped them to stay from a range of options based on responses to the 2009 survey. In addition they were also asked to report on which of these factors was most im-

portant. At NTU, friends made at university was still the second most frequently mentioned reason to remain. However, when we asked about the most important reasons to stay, friendships scarcely featured at all.

It is our experience of investigating this area that providing course 'socials' is not usually a good solution to improving social integration, particularly if they are run by staff and especially if used during induction. There will, of course, always be exceptions, and we would not wish to discourage programme teams from trying different approaches, but our experience suggests that there are better ways to encourage social engagement.

We suggest that programme teams consider the following:

- 5.1 Enhancing pre-arrival activities including social networking
- 5.2 Enhancing programme induction
- 5.3 Extending the use of group work (particularly field trips)
- 5.4 Considering the use of peer support (Buddies & Supplemental Instruction)



## 5.1 Enhancing pre-arrival activities including social networking

We imagine that most universities will be using Facebook and other social networking sites to communicate with students prior to their arrival at university. Most students do appear to want to start talking to others on the programme or in their accommodation in the weeks before they arrive on campus. However, we would suggest that just encouraging students to talk to one another via Facebook may not be enough. For example in the 2011 survey, Bournemouth University students logged into a range of social networking sites prior to starting university. The majority of students logged into those sites that might be expected (Facebook, yougofurther, etc) and there appeared to be fewer doubters amongst those who had done so. For example, 33% of students who logged into Facebook were doubters, just under 10% lower than the whole cohort. However BU also provided a dedicated online pre-arrival resource: Stepping Stones 2HE. Stepping Stones 2HE provides a set of pre-entry tasks including some online discussion prior to arrival which then forms part of the programme induction (Keenan, 2008). Only 17% of students who had logged on to Stepping Stones 2HE were doubters (albeit from a small sample). This appears to suggest that there are some benefits from social networking, but considerably more from providing dedicated pre-arrival activities embedded within online social interactions.

We recommend:

- Using social networking to provide an arena for students to start to build up friendships prior to arrival. Where possible, we would suggest making it as easy as possible for students to talk to peers in virtual spaces specific to their courses or accommodation rather than on a single insti-

tutional page.

- Providing students with information and academically-oriented activities prior to arrival similar to the Stepping Stones 2HE model (Keenan, 2008). Good examples of these types of activity include:
  - [Starting at NTU](#), Nottingham Trent University
  - [Flying Start](#), University of Leeds

## 5.2 Enhancing programme induction

Between 2006 & 2008, NTU students were asked to prioritise those features that they felt were most important to be contained within programme inductions. The single most important feature was that students wanted the opportunity to make friends. In the 2010 NTU Welcome Week Survey, the most frequently-mentioned place for making friends was in the course (87% of respondents), the second most common location was accommodation (74%). Programme inductions clearly can provide an opportunity to create a social climate. This is a particularly important finding, as NTU also provides a diverse social programme in the first week (Welcome Week) designed to provide students (particularly those not in halls) with opportunities to develop friendships and start to feel part of the university community. Feedback for Welcome Week is highly positive, but even so, students found that the place they were most likely to make friends was within the course.

We recommend:

- Delivering programme inductions that maximise opportunities for students to socialise. However, we would argue that the best way to do this is to build social and team building functions into normal course interactions, not by creating 'socials'.

These include:

- Ice breakers – whilst lecturers and students can be uncomfortable with icebreakers, many students will benefit from the opportunities created by ice breakers to learn other students' names and talk to one another. See the [NTU Icebreakers Guide](#) for

examples of activities.

- Small group tasks with a course related purpose. Edward (2001) provides an excellent example of a week-long integrated induction activity, but it doesn't need to be that complex. Short research tasks can be just as useful. For example, Art & Design programmes at NTU will often set students team tasks during the first week. They are expected to gather data relevant to the discipline, for example 'Street Fashion' and students are expected to interview and photograph people in the city, and then produce a group presentation from it.
- Reducing the amount of time students spend sat passively listening during induction. As a student interviewed by Edward (2001) puts it "*when you feel lost and bewildered, the last thing you want is long lectures*" (p. 438). Induction talks from a wide range of programme staff and specialists is clearly time efficient, but these 'circus talks', unfortunately, often feel like a rite of passage to be endured. Furthermore student recall of the details of any individual talk is often practically zero. Lectures in induction week may be a necessary evil, but we strongly recommend avoiding them where possible and instead creating small group activities and discussions that offer more opportunities for students to start to build support networks and feel part of the course community.

## 5.3 Extending the use of group work (particularly field trips)

Students interviewed by the HERE Project researchers reported that group projects had been valuable for making friends. Most teaching staff in HE will have experience of students who have found groups stressful and difficult at times, usually when one student is seen as not doing their fair share. Nonetheless, group work does appear to offer a valuable opportunity for students to develop friendships and build support networks.

Interestingly, fieldwork activities were felt to be particularly effective environments for developing social ties. *“I’ve never been so homesick as I was that weekend ... but what it did do was really pulled [together] our friendships ... because we were feeling a bit out of our depth ... then when you came back after, then you really felt that you knew people”* (BU Student Interview). As the quote describes, weekend and overnight trips appear to offer a more intense experience. McLaughlin, Southall & Rushton (2006) report using a 3-day field trip as part of the early induction process. Students reported a dramatic change in how well students knew one another, before and after the trip. Before the trip, the majority of students knew between 2–5 of their peers. After the trip, 72% knew ten or more.

However, Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) suggest that whilst shared experiences can function as shared rites of passage, they can have an excluding effect on those unwilling or unable to participate. Despite a large improvement in the social bonding for the majority of students, McLaughlin, Southall & Rushton (2006) reported that for one student, this was a significant contributing factor to their withdrawal. We therefore recommend that part of the preparation for field trips includes team building beforehand.

We recommend:

- Programme teams seriously consider the use of field trips as part of the process of building communities. We would also recommend that participation is integrated into the curriculum with preparatory team activities before and assessed elements afterwards.

## 5.4 Considering the use of peer support (buddying & supplemental instruction)

Some of the BU students interviewed reported that one environment they found particularly useful for making friends was in PAL sessions. PAL ([Peer Assisted Learning](#)) is a programme in which second and final year students are trained to facilitate workshops for first years. These have a social element, but are fundamentally academic in nature and reinforce learning taking place in the curriculum. The students choose what they'd like to work on from the curriculum and the PAL leaders facilitate discussion around the topic, essentially creating a facilitated study group. The PAL leaders are trained in facilitation techniques such as using icebreakers and the sessions are informal in nature. It appears that the students feel that this informality helps engender a sense of community in the group. *"In a PAL session, we had to say our names, where we are from and something unique about ourselves. I found that everyone let their guards down, so we could start getting to know each other"* (BU Student Transition Survey). The model for PAL was originally developed in the USA and tends to be known internationally as Supplemental Instruction. In the UK there is an accredited centre at Manchester University.

Buddying is a less-structured technique for using more experienced students to support first years. Although buddies can help new students with a wide range of needs, they tend to work primarily in social/pastoral support. Activities tend to include making contact with students via email prior to starting, showing students around the campus during induction week, hosting informal discussions, offering email advice, or even organising course social events. All of which can help engender

a greater sense of social cohesion within the programme.

We recommend:

- Using second and final year students to offer peer support to new students.
- **Supplemental Instruction**  
The two major centres of supplemental instruction type peer support in the UK are:
  - [Bournemouth University Peer Assisted Learning](#)
  - [The University of Manchester PASS National Centre](#)
  - One of the other What Works? Studies explored the impact of mentoring. [Aston University Peer Mentoring Programme.](#)
- **Buddying**  
Buddying can be a good way of testing out the use of student peer support by experimenting with a small number of activities during your induction. We would generally suggest that you experiment with buddying activities during programme induction. Activities might include:
  - Campus tours
  - Library tours
  - Small group discussions, for example what did the buddies find challenging or enjoyable about their first year, or what advice would they offer to new students?
  - Although we have some reservations, buddies might be precisely the right people to organise course 'socials'.

# Recommendation 6

## Improve a sense of belonging to the programme

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

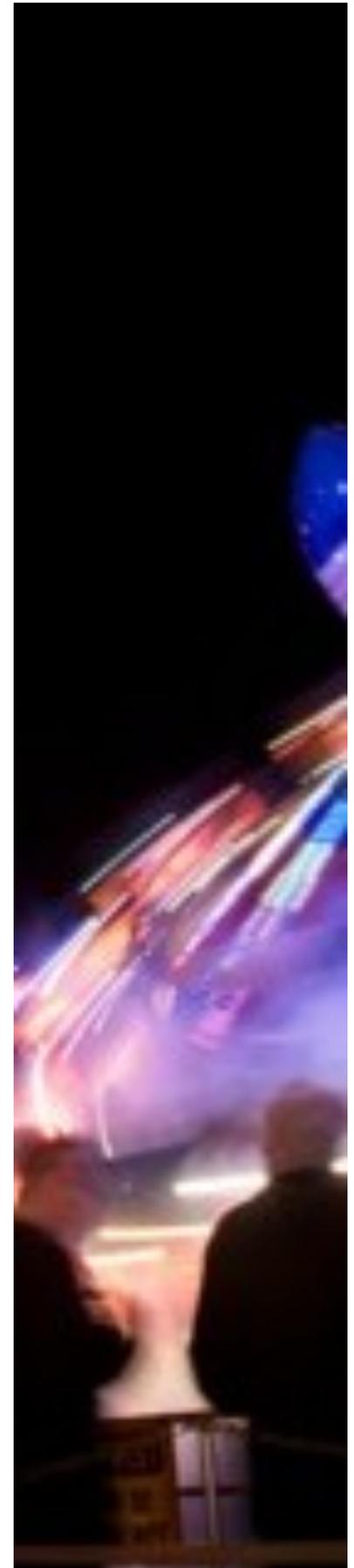
In the 2009 Nottingham Trent University focus group interviews, it was very striking that the non-doubting students could all recall a moment in time when they had started to feel that they belonged to the university. For some, this was joining clubs and societies, for others it was starting to recognise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

Earlier in this toolkit, we describe how doubters reported feeling less clear about university processes and less certain about their relationships with peers and tutors. It appears that that doubters are semi-detached from the

university environment and far less firmly fixed to the institution than their non-doubting peers. In 2011, we asked all students whether they felt that they fitted in or not. 75% of non-doubters felt that they did so, whereas only 45% of doubters felt the same way.

Palmer, O’Kane & Owens suggest that a sense of belonging (or not) can be reversed. They argue that the process of belonging is not a gradual linear one, that there is a ‘betwixt space’ in-between home and university (2009, p. 38). They suggest that a ‘turning point’ in the first 6–8 weeks of term may affect students sense of belonging at university (or not) and that these may be “subject to reversals and changes of direction” (ibid, p. 51). This suggests that institutions may be able to support students with belonging to the course and the university during the first year.

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



We suggest that course teams offer the following to help boost a sense of belonging to the course:

## 6.1 Developing good relationships with peers

See **Recommendation 5** Improve social integration for further information

6.1 Developing good relationships with peers

6.2 Developing a good working relationship with tutors

6.3 Developing a sense of community within the programme

6.4 Developing a sense of belonging to the wider university community

## 6.2 Developing a good working relationship with tutors

Developing good relationships between tutors and peers has been shown to increase a sense of belonging. Yorke and Thomas, for example, found that as students became known as individuals, this “..intimacy led to a sense of ‘belonging’ in the institution (or, in the larger institutions, in the relevant part of the institution)” (2003, p. 67).

See **Recommendation 3** Relationship and communication with staff

## 6.3 Developing a sense of community within the programme

One staff member interviewed during the programme audits explained that “*I would like to ... mention the issue of identity... students have often come from educational settings where they have had a really clear identity ... when they come to university it can be very difficult [as] they are not scheduled 9–5 each day to attend lectures to develop that identity. I think HE can overestimate the opportunities students have to feel a sense of belonging. Not everyone wants to join the football team*” (NTU Staff Interview). They emphasised the importance of timetabling group activities and long lunch breaks during Welcome Week to create opportunities for students to feel part of a course community.

We recommend:

- Many of the actions in earlier sections will help develop a sense of identity, for example
  - Ice breakers and small group activity early in the year
  - Small group tutorials
  - Group work & off site visits
- Some students may value opportunities to engage in electronic discussions, but these need managing carefully as students can be ambivalent about how they use institutional social media, particularly if there is a lecturer in the discussion.
- Where possible, developing space for students to feel they belong. Lecturers interviewed felt that students valued having an identifiable space that they belonged to. At NTU, timetabling is being redesigned partly to enable more defined course spaces.

## 6.4 Developing a sense of belonging to the wider university community

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

In 2011, researchers at Bournemouth University and University of Bradford asked students what additional social activities they would like their universities to offer. Students wanted to be offered a range of activities such as day trips, film nights, course socials and comedy events. At the start of each academic year, NTU provides a programme of social, cultural, academic and sporting activities known as Welcome Week. The Week provides approximately 350 opportunities for students to start to construct social support networks. These range from small scale cultural activities such as participating in a reading group to a large scale ‘It’s a Knockout’ competition known as Saturday Antics. In 2011, researchers at NTU asked students whether or not Welcome Week had helped them to make friends. It appeared that doubters were slightly less likely to have found Welcome Week

useful for making friends: only 57% of doubters reported that the week had been 'useful' or 'very useful' for making friends whereas, 65% of non-doubters felt the same way. It appears that even when a rich range of activities is offered, doubters may be more hesitant to participate than their non-doubting peers. There may still be some reassurance from the existence of these activities, but just providing them may not be enough.

We recommend that:

- Course teams find out about and promote institutional events (for example varsity sports, lecture series, exhibitions and significant social events such as balls) to their students. There may be strong benefits from taking part in these events as a whole course group.
- If there are opportunities to shape estates strategy, programme teams ought to press for spaces in which students can feel they belong. These venues may be strictly social such as lounges or cafés. However we would suggest that there may be more benefit from considering mixed use space where students feel they have a sense of belonging and could work as well as relax. These might include library spaces or spaces more akin to common rooms associated with particular programmes or schools/ faculties.

## Recommendation 7

### Foster motivation and help students understand how the programme can help them achieve their future goals

The HERE Project found that future goals, in particular, the goal of coming to university, had been an important motivator for students to stay in further education. The most commonly cited reason in the October 2008 Pilot Study for staying related to the future goal of wanting to go to university: *"I didn't want to prolong coming to Uni"* (Nottingham Trent University Pilot Study). The second most common reason was 'future goals, particularly employment'. The joint fourth reason related to 'determination and internal factors', for example *"I hate quitters! I will always continue until the end..."* (NTU Pilot Study).

In the 2009 Student Transition Survey, the primary reason given by students to stay at university (when asked as an open question) at all three institutions was 'friends and family'. The themes 'future goals and employment' and 'determination/ internal factors' still had an important place in motivating students: they were amongst the top three reasons to stay at all partner institutions. Students who had had doubts about being at university were also less likely to report that their course was helping them to achieve their future goals than non-doubters. In the 2011 Student Transition Survey, students were asked to choose from a list of possible reasons why they had stayed at university. In all three institutions 'personal determination' was the most commonly cited response and 'future goals', the second most common.

The qualitative research indicated that students were motivated by internal factors (such as a love of the subject) and external factors (such as future career, employment). Often (but not

always) these factors appeared inter-linked. For example, *"I enjoy education and wanted to spend more time developing and improving myself ... I wanted to get better skills that would make me more attractive to employers and enable me to get the job I want"* (Bournemouth University Student Transition Survey).

These reasons to stay appear to reflect the reasons that many students had for initially coming to university, which were revealed as part of the Student Transition Survey. At Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford the most common reason for coming to university related to future goals, careers or jobs. In addition, factors such as wanting to do the course, gaining an academic qualification, developing further or learning more were common.

The 2009 and 2011 Student Transition Surveys found that a small number of students were motivated to stay at university as they felt that they had 'no other choice': they described that their age, finances or module choices so far meant that they couldn't leave. The qualitative findings found some link here between these students and a poor relationship with staff on their programme (see **Recommendations 3 & 4**).



We suggest that programme teams consider the following approaches:

7.1 Supporting students to find their own internal motivation

7.2 Connecting students to possible external motivators

7.3 Providing opportunities to sample work-related experiences

## 7.1 Supporting students to find their own internal motivation

Motivation is largely an internal factor and essentially the responsibility of the individual. However in our study we found that there were a number of ways that the programme teams could create an environment conducive to students motivating themselves.

Firstly, it may be particularly valuable to help students see 'possible selves' (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007). Stevenson et al. (2010) highlight how institutions can impact on possible selves – both in terms of offering advice/mentoring and giving a context for these selves to develop. They argue that it is important that staff are known to students and that there are opportunities for interaction and reflection. Stevenson & Clegg (2010) also suggest that valuing students in the present can play a positive role looking forward.

It ought also to be possible to help students see how they can be agents within their own learning experience and how by engaging with it can shape it. As Mann (2008) states: "Agency arises in the capacity of the individual to make sense of their own particular circumstances in their own way and in the individual's capacity to transform these. Such action can be both individual and collective" (Mann, 2008, p12).

We would therefore suggest that student engagement is a dynamic process dependent upon the individual student, their peers and the systems and processes the university uses to deliver learning and teaching to them.

We recommend that:

- Programme teams support students internal motivation through encouraging students to consider their own motivations for being at university, rewarding the positive and fostering a good relationship with students.
  - One programme for example used a 'Wall of Success' activity during induction week whereby students write a note on the wall about what they consider success to be at university. This was aimed at engaging students with the degree and motivating them for the future.
  - Programmes used various ways to celebrate student achievements such as letters of commendation to students who do well in the first year, commendations in the university or department magazine.
  - Current and past students were used to discuss their experiences. A 'Speed-up dating event', for example, saw former students come in to talk about what they've been doing since they left the course to help motivate the students on their academic journey.
- See also **Recommendation 3** Relationship and communication with staff.

## 7.2 Connecting students to possible external motivators

Students appear to want reassurance that their degree will help them to achieve their future goals. Student doubters appeared to respond positively to activities that help them to understand how actions in the first year will help them prepare for future employability. For example *"The lecturers are very good and all have lots of experience in industry. The assignments are relevant to tasks you would typically be set in the work place"* (BU Programme Student Survey).

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

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

We recommend that:

- Where possible and relevant, learning & teaching is related to career prospects and employment from early on in the course.

- For example in the HERE Project study, one course used teacher practitioners to give perspective in the real world, another held a careers day to meet local employers.

## 7.3 Providing opportunities to sample work-related experiences

- Students are involved in staff projects.
  - At NTU, for example, the [SPUR](#) scheme (Scholarship Projects for Undergraduate Researchers) awards bursaries to staff to involve second year students in research projects.
  - At UoB, one course runs a student led research project on evaluating induction week. The programme reports that this allows students to examine aspects of the student experience so they feel they are impacting on how their programme operates and being acknowledged for their input.
- Where possible, employability is formalised as part of the curriculum. This was done in different ways by programmes and in various degrees, for example, through professional practice modules or embedded activities such as careers and information sessions within modules.

Placements appear to be valuable motivators as they help students to both develop skills and knowledge relevant to possible future roles, but also to allow students to imagine themselves in these new roles, *“I am starting to believe that I can become a social worker”* (Bournemouth University, Programme Survey ). At Bournemouth University, for example, one of the programmes sampled provided students with an opportunity to participate in fieldwork during their first week at university. *“We make a point of ... making sure that students can see how their interest could be developed into work skills through engagement in fieldwork .. I think that is a big part of making students feel that they’re able to put their enjoyment into action that will actually get them work...”* (BU Staff Interview). One programme introduced placement opportunities into the first year in response to some students leaving after their placement in the second year when they realised that this career ‘wasn’t for them’.

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

We recommend that:

- Where possible, opportunities are provided for work based learning, placements, work experience or fieldwork.
  - One programme offers a day of fieldwork during induction week to engage students early on, another offers a 20 day placement preceded by a unit that explores personal and professional development.
- Students are also encouraged to explore opportunities outside of their course that relate to their chosen career such as volunteering and relevant paid work opportunities
- Where possible these opportunities are effectively promoted and advertised.
  - Programmes in our studies used emails, the VLE and posters, to advertise relevant paid and volunteering opportunities.

# Recommendation 8

## Encourage students' active engagement with the curriculum

Kuh (2001) describes student engagement as “the time and effort students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices” (Kuh et al, 2008, p. 542). This definition, whilst valuable, does not take into consideration the broader environmental factors, motivations and personal circumstances that shape each student’s experience of higher education. To explore these factors further we would suggest turning to writers such as Barnett (2007) and Hardy & Bryson (2010). Bryson & Hand (2008) and Trowler (2010) describe engagement taking place along a continuum. Furthermore, Coates (2007) argues that student engagement is dynamic: previously engaged students can become disengaged and vice versa.

Engaging students is likely to come about through a combination of approaches. Willis (1993) argues that student engagement is dependent upon the interplay between students’ intentions and the learning context, the most powerful contextual factor is the role of the lecturer. Mann (2005) warns that assessment processes that do not meaningfully engage the learner can be alienating. However, Hockings (2010) reports that a student centred approach to learning appears to engage the majority of students but around 30% of students were not engaged by such an approach. The US-based National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggests that engagement can come about through programmes of activity in five core fields:

1. academic challenge
2. active & collaborative learning
3. student interaction with faculty
4. enriching educational experiences

5. supportive campus environment.

However “simply offering such programs ... does not guarantee ... student success. [they need to be] customized to meet the needs of students...” (Kuh et al, 2008, p. 556).

In their large multi-institutional studies of the first year, Yorke & Longden found that a major reason for withdrawal was “a lack of personal engagement with the programme” (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p. 41). Barnett (2007) argues that the study of persistence is more than merely reversing the arguments about why students depart early, but is instead a more ontological one about the nature of being a student. He argues that the potentially transformative nature of engaging with the discipline and tutors ought to be nurtured. Castles (2004) found that love of learning was a factor that seemed particularly important to students who had persisted (Castles, 2004, p. 176), albeit from a small sample.

The HERE Project asked students to report on 17 factors associated with their experiences of being a student. Two factors were particularly associated with student engagement:

- my subject is interesting
- I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course.

‘Enthusiastic lecturers’ and an ‘interesting subject’ were rated amongst the five most important of the 17 factors. As was the case with most responses student doubters reported a lower score than their non-doubting peers. In the 2011 Student Transition Survey, 60% of doubters reported that their course was interesting, as did 84% of non-doubters. Similarly 50% of

doubters reported having enthusiastic lecturers, as did 67% of non-doubters.

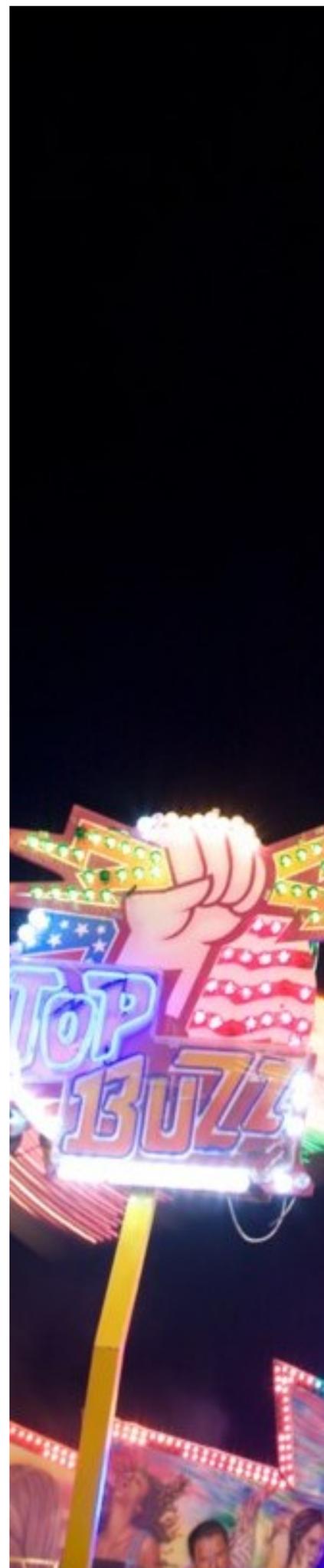
In 2011, the team at Nottingham Trent University analysed the responses provided to the question “What makes your subject personally interesting to you?” Doubters and non-doubters provided largely the same types of answers, however there were differences. Non-doubters appear more likely to find the subject intrinsically interesting. This student, when asked, ‘What makes your subject personally interesting to you’, explained *“I am fascinated by my subject, I can't explain why, but I love learning about organisms and how they work”* (NTU Student Transition Survey). Doubters were more likely to cite aspects of the learning and teaching experience as important reasons for generating interest. For example *“The discussions, the theories and arguments promoted ... really open your mind up to new ways in which to think about photography”* (NTU Student Transition Survey). Whilst it appears that the factors closely overlap, this does suggest that even though doubters may be less intrinsically interested in the subject matter, this can be ameliorated through the use of interesting learning and teaching techniques.

We would suggest that the programme team take the following approaches:

8.1 Using active learning approaches throughout the first year

8.2 Providing a range of rich learning experiences during the first year

8.3 Using formative assessment in the first year



## 8.1 Using active learning approaches throughout the first year

Most students arriving at University each Autumn will have previously studied in an environment in which they will have received high levels of guidance and support to help them in their previous studies (Foster, Lawther & McNeil, 2011). There is a risk that if their early experiences of HE are in large, potentially anonymous cohorts, engaged in seemingly passive tasks (lectures), they will adopt strategies of minimal engagement. Therefore it appears important to engage students with active and interesting forms of learning from the very start of the course. It is important that approaches are agreed across the course, Hand & Bryson (2008) noted that students could be highly conservative in their responses to different teaching practices. They were perceived as aberrant rather than innovative.

Programme teams interviewed by the HERE researchers considered it fundamental to recruit the most suitable people to teach first year students and encouraged their staff to evaluate and review practice in order to continually improve the learning experience for students. This reflects recommendations from Yorke and Longden that “those teaching first-year students should have a strong commitment to teaching and learning” (2008, p. 48).

We would recommend that:

- Group work is introduced to students early to facilitate the development of learning communities that encourage academic and social integration.
- Students are involved in practical work such as experiments, field-work and research from the very

start of their university career (Healey & Jenkins, 2009).

- Student-centred approaches that are interactive and involve students in the learning process are adopted.
- Teaching staff are absolutely clear to their students about the value of discussion, debate and the culture of asking questions.

## 8.2 Providing a range of rich learning experiences during the first year

Too much variety of learning activities and assessment introduced too quickly runs the risk of overwhelming learners before they have fully mastered the craft of being a learner in HE. However, we would suggest that there may be benefits from offering rich learning experiences from the outset.

We would recommend:

- Using projects in which students can see real world applications.
  - A programme at Bournemouth University, for example, makes extensive use of real life projects *“Every year we have lots of our students being involved working with the National Trust, working with the RSPB doing practical conservation work that’s related to research work that we’re doing here so I think they can see how it all joins up and I think that’s really important ... it’s about preparing them for their life and that they can take control of how they build that degree and the surrounding experience to make it possible for them to live the career and the life they want to lead”* (BU Staff Interview).
  - Another programme engages first year students in ‘Real Life Projects’ whereby students work in small groups on one of four different tasks that help them to apply their learning to the real world. One group is responsible for organising a social activity, another responsible for inviting a guest speaker, one must engage in a ‘making a differ-

ence’ project (for example helping the community), and a final group must arrange a fund-raising initiative. As well as helping students to bond, the tasks help students to actively develop their project management, event organisation and team working skills. To assess the tasks, students are asked to record project documentation online. Rather than a final report, students have to provide documentary evidence of their event/project using multimedia to present it in an engaging way, such as narrated auto-running PowerPoint presentations, video clips, YouTube and Facebook. This practice example was referred to by both staff and students as an initiative that made the subject interesting as the ‘hands-on’ element allowed students to unleash their creativity.

## 8.3 Using formative assessment in the first year

In the 2009 Student Transition Survey, the factor at NTU with the strongest association with students' confidence about coping with their studies was whether or not they found the feedback to be as they expected. Confidence therefore appeared to be associated with whether or not the student appeared to understand and be able to use the feedback provided. Foster, Lawther and McNeil (2011) note that students' experience of feedback prior to university is far more frequent and often more directive to that which they encounter at university. As we have identified in **Recommendation 1**, it appears that students would benefit from help learning how to use feedback. We would also suggest that students will benefit from receiving formative feedback in the first year.

We would recommend that:

- Students have the opportunity to receive some formative feedback in the first year (see Yorke, 2003) or explore other forms of feedback such as peer review or feedback from student mentors.

# Recommendation 9

## Ensure that there is good communication about and access to additional student support

We define additional support as that provided by specialists such as financial advisers, counsellors, careers advisers, chaplains, disability specialists etc. Support from these services was reported by relatively few doubters as a reason to stay. However, it was found in the student interviews that for some students this additional support was instrumental in their decision to persist. These student doubters describe their reason to stay:

*“Without student support services I would have left. Having dyslexia it has been the most significant factor to choosing and continuing at [University]”* (Nottingham Trent University Student Transition Survey).

*“[The International Student Office] saved my life, [in] my first week...they showed me everything I needed to know. Literally”* (University of Bradford Student Transition Survey).

One of the issues that arose from our study was that of awareness about professional and support services. One of the subtexts of the HERE Project is the centrality of the course team in shaping the students’ understanding of the university environment. They are, for many students, gatekeepers to further professional support and it is therefore crucial that they are aware of the services available to students.

Borland and James (1999) reporting specifically on the learning experience of students with disabilities report that the “mainstay of student support”; the first port of call, is the academic tutor. The Student Transition Survey 2011 also found that students were much more likely to have sought help from members of staff on the programme than from friends, family, central student

support services or administrative staff. Overall, student doubters were less likely to know where to go if they had a problem than non-doubters. Conversely they also appeared to place more importance on actually knowing where to go. We would suggest that this perhaps reflects an underlying anxiety.

Whilst student doubters were less likely to report feeling confident about asking for support from their tutors than non-doubters. Doubters who had experienced problems were more likely to have actually asked for help. Although this may be because non-doubters had worked through the problems themselves. It is therefore of key importance that students have good communication with their tutor (in this toolkit we argue for the importance of one named person) and that programme staff are well informed about the support that students can access including how and when referral to other services should be made.

We recommend that access to additional student support can be promoted through:

9.1 Ensuring that programme teams know how to refer students to professional and specialist support

9.2 Raising student awareness of the services available



## 9.1 Ensuring that programme teams know how to refer students to professional and specialist support

We would recommend that:

- All members of the programme team periodically remind themselves of the services available and how to contact these teams.
- One of the programme teams, for example, circulates a Student Support Services guide, 'the Student Support Directory' amongst the team. *"We download it and send it to the programme team and point staff to it so they are aware ... it is important for us not to think we can solve everything. It is good to know there is support out there"* (NTU Staff Interview).
- All staff are aware of how and where to refer students for further support as appropriate.
- Programme staff are linked in to support services and work closely with them where appropriate.
- For example one NTU programme introduces support available to students during induction. The School Learning Support Coordinator meets the students in the first week and students take part in an interactive session from Student Support Services which addresses issues of resilience and being supportive as a group. An early formative writing assessment also serves to highlight students who may have difficulties with writing and they are referred to Dyslexia Support Services if appropriate.

## 9.2 Raising student awareness of the services available

Research has highlighted the role that student services can play in supporting the social integration of students, by "helping students to locate each other (for example, mature students, international students), by providing social spaces, by offering more flexible and affordable accommodation options and by compensating for the informal support usually provided by networks of friends" (Thomas et al., 2002, p. 5). Interviews with student doubters indicated that students were not always aware of the support available to them from support services, such as mature student events, and that part time students in particular sometimes felt overlooked as information was often aimed at full time students.

We recommend that:

- Services available are promoted to students, preferably early in the first term.
- Students are reminded of support available at key 'at risk' times of the year and that students have a copy of support available to refer to as needed.
- Examples from the programme research include a spider diagram in induction week that identifies where students would go for support for a specific problem and an 'Unofficial Student Handbook'. This is an alternative format of the information that will help students during induction and the first few weeks of term. The handbook includes a timetable for the first week, what rooms the students need to find and pictures of staff. It is light hearted and contains only relevant information for the

first week as staff believe that students don't look at the official university student handbook. It includes; the most essential regulations from the official university handbook summarised in twenty main points, a section on what a lecture is, what a seminar is, what the floor numbers mean and how to find a room and maps.

- Information about support services from programmes is tailored to groups of students where appropriate.
  - Part time students, for example, suggested that their course material should contain information relevant to them such as fees, sponsorship, module credits and duration of course, to prevent them feeling 'side-lined'.

# Evaluation—testing what worked for you

The nine recommendations in the HERE Project toolkit are gathered from our work with doubters and programme teams. However, as we outlined in the introduction, there is no magic bullet, but a series of related interventions that have worked in a particular context.

Therefore, we suggest that it is important for programme teams using the toolkit to consider how they test the impact of the recommendations once implemented.

On page 7 (**how to use the toolkit**) we suggested that you plan times to review the impact of implementing any recommendations. We suggested two points:

- within a few months of starting to make changes, and also
- at the end of the academic year.

Whilst one part of the review would be to discuss how implementation is working, it would also be valuable to evaluate the impact of any interventions. Your own institution may have a policy for evaluating the impact of any educational developments, therefore we only offer some short pointers for your consideration.

Evaluating impact is, of course, complex in a field with as many variables as student retention. We have therefore provided a brief outline of possible questions that may be helpful when reviewing interventions.

- What are you seeking to measure? What is it that you

want to improve? For example, by the end of the academic year, do you want a percentage increase in retention, or perhaps a less-challenging initial goal such as creating a more socially-integrated programme?

- Are you looking to measure change over a short period or a longer period (or both?)
- Who are you hoping to make changes to? Is your focus, for example, on making changes for particular student groups or the whole cohort?
- Are you also looking at the process of making change to programme practice? In this case you may also want to consider how change has been taken up by the wider programme team.

Rather than create new evaluation strategies, we would recommend, where possible, using or adapting existing data and evaluation opportunities such as module evaluation.

## Using your findings

We suggest that you take time to review the findings to inform programme planning for the following year.

- What changes were you able to implement?
- What impact did they appear to have?
- What would you do differently

next time?

- Did you uncover different important issues?
- Are there any other themes that you want to work on?

The HERE toolkit has been designed so that programme teams can engage with it quite informally. Nonetheless, if you are able to spare the time, we suggest writing an action plan for the following year.

## Enabling others to learn from your findings

Finally, if you have learnt, or developed your own, strategies to improve engagement and or retention, how will you share that practice? Universities are, of course, centres of learning, but also very good at reinventing the wheel. If you have found something works, can you share it at meetings, staff development events or quality assurance processes? Perhaps your work can save a colleague elsewhere in the institution a lot of time. And besides, they might be able to do the same for you.

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# The HERE Project Research Team (2008–2011)

## Nottingham Trent University

### Ed Foster

Ed's work is all about helping students to become effective learners in HE. This is done through a range of practical outputs, he co-ordinates NTU's Welcome Week programme and jointly leads the development of the institutional induction strategy. From 2011, all course inductions had online content and pre-arrival activities. Ed's research interests in US models of the first year experience and the findings from the HERE Project directly led to the creation of an extended academic tutorial programme for all new first years students. Ed heads the learning development team in the library leading a team of staff & student mentors.

### Sarah Lawther

Sarah is part of the Learning Development Team, based in Nottingham Trent University's library. She is a trained researcher who has enjoyed working on the HERE Project. Prior to this, she carried out research on student transition into the first year. This research informs the work we do as a team to support staff and students at NTU. Sarah is also involved in the practical support we provide to staff and students such as Welcome Week, our annual Student Writing and Transition Symposium, and the development of resources and staff workshops in areas such as induction, transition and retention.

## Bournemouth University

### Chris Keenan

Chris is a learning and teaching fellow at Bournemouth University where her main role is as an education developer. Her area of research is transition into HE and she is currently leading on two projects looking at transition to HE STEM programmes and the role of Peer Assisted Learning on HE STEM programmes. Currently Chris is also Chair of the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education ([www.aldinhe.ac.uk](http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk)).

### Natalie Bates

Natalie is a Research and Knowledge Exchange Officer at Bournemouth University. During the HERE! project Natalie worked as a Research Assistant at Bournemouth University and was involved in a number of externally funded projects that explored the first year experience of students at university and their transition to higher education, in particular the role of friendship in student transition and its influence on students that have doubts in their first year of study. Natalie holds professional and academic qualifications in teaching and lifelong learning and her research interests include the international transfer of learning and professional skills to the UK.

## University of Bradford

### Becka Colley

Becka is the Dean of Students at the University of Bradford, she has created an innovative approach to supporting skills development at Bradford which includes the development of the SaPRA tool and the [Develop Me!](#) approach to skills activities. She has a keen interest in student engagement and is active in researching the student experience of e-learning, transition to University and initial engagement with Higher Education. Her current research is focusing on digital literacy. Becka was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2010.

### Ruth Lefever

Ruth joined the University of Bradford as a Research Associate in 2009 having come from a welfare and retention focused role. Her previous research covered the first year experience, withdrawals, student representation, widening participation, internationalisation and student resilience. Ruth's current research at Bradford continues to focus on the student experience and includes projects on student retention and engagement, supporting transitions into and through university as well as student feedback and student experience policy. Her particular interests include qualitative research, student friendships and community building, notions of belonging and gender issues.

The HERE Project was a research project funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Higher Education Funding Council for England to explore retention and engagement as part of the 'What Works? Student Retention & Success' programme. The work was conducted by colleagues from Nottingham Trent University, Bournemouth University and the University of Bradford.

Most of the photographs were taken at the Nottingham Goose Fair by NTU's photographer, Debbie Whitmore. They have been used because they're visually interesting and as a metaphor for the ups and downs that students starting university face. The photo on page 5 was by Paul Molineaux of the Learning Development Team at NTU.

HERE project researchers went on to explore transition and retention to HE in STEM disciplines. Elements of the HERE project toolkit have therefore been developed into a guide for an HE STEM Practice Transfer Project in the Transition, Induction and Retention theme entitled "STEMming the flow: Enhanced transition and induction to HE STEM programmes".