

# What Works? Student Retention & Success

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## Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change:

a summary of findings and recommendations from the  
What Works? Student Retention & Success programme

### Summary Report

By Professor Liz Thomas  
March 2012



*“The work undertaken within the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme has given the opportunity to those institutions involved to develop and enhance the evaluation of their strategies and approaches further. It is now vital that the lessons learned and progress made through the programme is shared with and benefits all HE providers and their students. HEFCE will continue to encourage institutions to develop and enhance initiatives which contribute to success throughout the whole student lifecycle, including progression to post-graduate study and into employment.”*

Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of HEFCE

*“The benefits that a university education typically adds to an individual’s career prospects and to their quality of life generally is widely recognised, but is something that needs greater articulation. The outcomes of the seven projects, summarised in this report, will help to convey this message and provide an excellent foundation to continue both the sharing and development of good practice across the sector.”*

Professor Eric Thomas, President of Universities UK

## Foreword

What is the secret of success in higher education? What can universities do to help prevent students from dropping out of their studies? These are clearly vitally important questions. Both morally and educationally, institutions have a duty to do everything they can to help students make a success of their higher education. At a time of profound change in the sector, these questions take on an added urgency. Students are investing heavily in their higher education and institutions stand to lose a considerable sum of money for each student that drops out.

This report is therefore greatly to be welcomed. It provides a timely and important set of insights into What Works? based on the experience of a wide range of interventions across the sector. The result is a radical new message. In place of the received wisdom of the importance to students of choice and flexibility, is the finding that it is a sense of belonging that is critical to both retention and success. It is the human side of higher education that comes first – finding friends, feeling confident and above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution – that is the necessary starting point for academic success.

This report challenges institutions to look afresh at their priorities and to consider: how the curriculum might be reorganised to provide for sustained engagement between teachers and students; how teaching can be organised to create student learning communities; and how to convey the message to students that they belong. The projects reported briefly here and at more length in the full report of the What Works? programme, offer a number of important new insights. If our higher education institutions are to maximise both their students' happiness and their future success, these insights deserve close study across the sector.

Professor Patricia Broadfoot CBE  
University of Bristol  
Chair of What Works? Advisory Group

# Contents

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<b>Foreword</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Student retention and success – the challenges</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>What works? .... Nurturing a culture of belonging</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Key findings from the What Works? programme</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Engaging practice: Characteristics of effective interventions and approaches</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Strategic implications for institutions</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Institutional reflective checklist</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>For further information and support</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The What Works? projects</b>	<b>12</b>

## Introduction

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This report presents a summary of the findings and recommendations of the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme, initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE.

With much widening participation research concentrating on the effectiveness of outreach and pre-entry work, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation was keen to support the higher education sector in identifying and sharing best practice, across the student lifecycle, to enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, to succeed in higher education. HEFCE wished to support the improved evaluation and dissemination of good practice with regards to student retention and success, and to further build the evidence base for successful retention practice. This followed a National Audit Office report of 2007, which confirmed the strong performance of higher education institutions in retaining their students, but also found that the sector was carrying out little evaluation of the impact and transferability of good practice.

This is a time of immense change in the higher education system. The government is aiming to use student choice as a major driver in shaping HE provision, and some commentators anticipate that increased student fees will lead to higher expectations and, some argue, a stronger 'consumer' mindset amongst students. In this context, the need for institutions to understand how they can most effectively translate their strategic intentions to improve student retention and success into activities that will most effectively impact on student, department and institutional-level outcomes, is clearly paramount.

The What Works? programme has therefore sought to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation about the most effective practices to ensure high continuation and completion rates. Twenty two higher education institutions, collaborating through seven distinct projects (see p.12), which were selected through a competitive process, participated in the programme from 2008–11. They undertook extensive research to inform their enquiries and test specific hypotheses. Most studies combined student survey data, qualitative research with students and staff, literature reviews and analysis of institutional data.

A fuller synthesis and discussion of the programme's findings and both practical and strategic implications is given in the full programme report. Detailed project-level findings are set out in the seven individual project reports. In addition a *Compendium of Effective Practice in Higher Education Retention & Success* has been published to provide more practical exemplars of successful interventions, drawn from the institutions that have participated in What Works? and from the wider sector. A second edition will be published in July 2012.

The Higher Education Academy will be leading ongoing work to support institutional teams across the sector to implement changes informed by the What Works? programme. Further details will be available in the summer from **[retention&success@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:retention&success@heacademy.ac.uk)**

## Student retention and success – the challenges

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Although the UK is often cited as having high rates of student retention, progression and completion compared to international comparators, non-standard definitions of these terms, and differing data collection practices (van Stolk et al 2007) make such comparisons problematic.

In the UK only 1 in 12 students, or 8%, leave HE during their first year of study, but surveys undertaken by What Works? project teams across four institutions found that **between 33% (1/3) and 42% (2/5) of students think about withdrawing** from HE.

This finding demonstrates that a significant minority of students consider withdrawal. Rectifying this should be a priority for all programmes, departments and institutions. Entry qualifications are not the only indicators of students being at risk of non-continuation, and it is not easy to predict who will run into difficulties. Mainstream approaches to ensuring student retention and success are therefore required to enable all students to benefit. These can be supplemented by paying attention to the ways in which students integrate, behave and perform once they are in HE and then intervening with more targeted approaches as necessary.

High rates of withdrawal and low rates of satisfaction may have **reputational, economic, ethical and legal implications** for universities and colleges, as well personal and financial disadvantages for individuals.

In terms of economics, when a student leaves an institution before completion of their target award this represents lost income for the institution, which cannot easily be replaced. From 2012/13 a full-time, non-residential student who withdraws in the first semester from an institution charging £7,500 fees would be equivalent to at least £24,300 of lost income to the institution over the duration of a three-year course. A residential student would represent lost income in the region of £33,300 over the same period (if institutional accommodation fees are £3000 per annum).

In terms of ethics and social responsibility it is reasonable to argue that, given the student was admitted because the institution thought they had the potential to succeed, there is an obligation to take reasonable steps to enable them to be successful. In the words of Vincent Tinto (2008), access without support is not opportunity. Bamber and Tett (2001) argue that: “Higher education must accept that the implications of offering access to non-traditional students do not end, but rather begin, at the point of entry.”

As the cost for higher education is shifted to individual students rather than taxpayers it is important not just to improve student retention, but to **enhance the student experience and maximise the success of all students.**

Following the introduction of higher student fees in 2012/13 students may have greater incentive and easier access to review more information about universities, including data on retention and completion and employment outcomes (through Key Information Sets and institutional promotional information). Indeed, 65% of students surveyed by HSBC/NUS said they would have 'even higher expectations of their experience at university' as a result of a rise in fees (NUS Connect 2010). Further possible consequences of increased student fees may include: more students choosing to continue to live in the family home rather than in university accommodation or with student peers; more students combining part- or full-time study with employment; and students postponing entering HE and thus studying as mature students. All of these factors may make it more difficult for students to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE, which might have a detrimental impact on their retention and success.



## What works? .... Nurturing a culture of belonging

The 22 institutions participating in the What Works? programme examined alternative approaches to improving student retention and success using a range of methods. Their findings and conclusions were remarkably consistent.

At the heart of successful retention and success is a **strong sense of belonging in HE for all students**. This is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in.

Our definition of 'belonging' is closely aligned with the concept of student engagement, encompassing both academic and social engagement, with academic engagement synonymous with deep, as opposed to surface learning or compliance. It accords closely with Goodenow's description of belonging in educational environments:

*Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (Goodenow 1993 p.25)*

We acknowledge the heterogeneity of the student body, and thus the need for institutions to meet students' needs to engage and belong in different ways, through providing a range of opportunities to foster engagement and belonging. The full What Works? report provides further discussion, within the context of this study and the wider literature base, about these concepts.

The **academic sphere is the most important site** for nurturing participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging.

All of the What Works? evidence points to this conclusion. Academic programmes and high-quality student-centred learning and teaching must be a primary focus for effective student retention and success. Students are most likely to feel like they belong to their programme, with a sense of belonging generally decreasing at departmental, school and institutional levels.

Specific interventions cannot be recommended over and above each other. Rather **the institution, department, programme and module should all nurture a culture of belonging through the way they function and relate to people**.

The What Works? projects evaluated the impact of a range of different interventions, designed to enhance student retention and success. These included pre-entry and induction activities, group and collaborative learning, personal tutoring and peer mentoring. Some of these are detailed in the full What Works? Student Retention & Success report. A wide range are documented in the *What Works? Compendium of Effective Practice in Higher Education Retention & Success*. Some specific interventions were shown to improve retention rates by up to ten percentage points. Analysis of the approaches evaluated, combined with the wider data collected, found that the key to boosting student retention and success lies not in any specific intervention, but stems from a set of key characteristics, underpinning principles and wider institutional culture, all intended to foster student belonging.

In particular, analysis of effective approaches to improving retention and success demonstrates that:

**Student belonging is achieved through:**

- Supportive **peer relations**
- Meaningful **interaction between staff and students**
- Developing **knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners
- An HE experience **relevant to students' interests and future goals**



## Key findings from the What Works? programme

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The key findings from the evaluation and research activities undertaken by the 22 institutions participating in the programme over a three-year period are set out below. These findings represent a synthesis of the findings from seven individual reports, cross-referenced with other research and learning from the UK and internationally, that has taken place during the period of the programme. The findings and the implications for the sector have been further tested with groups of pro-vice chancellors and other senior managers from higher education institutions.

Fuller discussion of these findings is given in the full What Works? report. The following sections of this summary report outline the implications for practice within higher education by suggesting a set of characteristics that should be designed into effective interventions and approaches, and highlight the strategic implications for the wider institution.

1. In the UK only 1 in 12 students, or 8%, leave HE during their first year of study. Surveys undertaken by What Works? project teams found that between 33% (1/3) and 42% (2/5) of students think about withdrawing from HE. Thus a **significant minority of students consider withdrawal**, so improving student belonging should be a priority for all programmes, departments and institutions.
2. Students surveyed across a number of institutions identified a range of reasons why they have thought about leaving HE, with most students having more than one reason. But the survey data and qualitative research identify **academic issues, feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in and concern about achieving future aspirations as the primary reasons why students think about leaving**. Students are particularly likely to consider leaving (a) after Christmas and (b) during the first semester.
3. **Relationships between staff and students and peers promote and enable student engagement and success in HE**. These should be nurtured pre-entry, in the classroom and in the delivery of professional services.
4. Some programmes have better rates of retention than would be predicted on the basis of entry grades, and some **specific interventions have been shown to improve retention rates by up to ten percentage points**.
5. Particularly effective interventions are situated in the **academic sphere**. They start pre-entry, and have an overt academic purpose. Such interventions often develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, shape realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop students' confidence, demonstrate future relevance, and nurture belonging.

# Engaging practice: Characteristics of effective interventions and approaches

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The What Works? projects examined various interventions and approaches to improving student retention and success. What became clear was that the exact type of intervention or approach is less important than the way it is offered and its intended outcomes. All interventions or activities should aim to nurture a culture of belonging, through: supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction between staff and students; developing the knowledge, expectations and confidence to be successful HE learners; and providing an HE experience which is relevant to interests and future goals.

## **Interventions and approaches should be planned and informed by the following principles:**

**Mainstream:** interventions and approaches to improve student retention and success should as far as possible be embedded into mainstream provision to ensure all students participate and benefit from them. This will improve the retention of some students and contribute to maximising the success of all students. An opt-out rather than opt-in approach should be the norm (i.e. where all students participate unless they choose not to, rather than them having to choose to participate). Particular attention should be paid to students who opt out or who fail to engage, and additional support provided if necessary.

**Proactive and developmental:** activities should proactively seek to engage students and develop their capacity to do so, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur, or the more confident students to take up opportunities. Students who most need support are the least likely to come forward voluntarily. If students have to opt in it is important to make it transparent how students can and should engage, and why.

**Relevant:** activities need to be informative, useful and relevant to students' current academic interests and future aspirations; the potential benefits of engaging should be explicit.

**Well timed and appropriate media:** early engagement is essential to student retention and success. Information may be better delivered via a range of media, as students' learning styles and needs will differ from each other and over time.

**Collaborative:** activities should encourage collaboration and engagement with fellow students and members of staff.

**Monitored:** the extent and quality of students' engagement should be monitored, and where there is evidence of low levels of engagement follow-up action should be taken.

## Strategic implications for institutions

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The main recommendation from the What Works? programme is that higher education institutions should aim to **nurture a culture of belonging within the academic and social community**. This should be encouraged through active student engagement, across the institution but especially in the academic sphere through student-centred learning and teaching which in turn promotes social integration. Engagement and belonging is especially important at an early stage.

**This should be enabled by institution-level commitment to the following:**

1. The **commitment** to a culture of belonging should be explicit through institutional **leadership** in internal and external discourses and **documentation** such as the strategic plan, website, prospectus and all policies.
2. Nurturing belonging and improving retention and success should be a **priority for all staff** as a significant minority of students think about leaving, and changes need to be mainstreamed to maximise the success of all students.
3. **Staff capacity** to nurture a culture of belonging needs to be developed. Staff-related policies need to be developed to ensure:
  - Staff **accountability** for retention and success in their areas
  - **Recognition** of staff professionalism and contributions to improve retention and success in terms of time and expertise
  - Access to **support and development** resources as necessary
  - Appropriate **reward** for staff who improve learning and teaching to engage and retain more students in higher education and maximise the success of all students. This should be recognised through progression and promotion frameworks.
4. **Student capacity** to engage and belong must be developed early through:
  - **Clear expectations, purpose and value** of engaging and belonging
  - Development of **skills** to engage
  - Providing **opportunities** for interaction and engagement that all can participate in.
5. High-quality **institutional data** should be available and used to identify departments, programmes and modules with higher rates of withdrawal, non-progression and non-completion.
6. Systems need to be in place to **monitor student behaviour**, particularly participation and performance, to identify students at risk of withdrawing, rather than only relying on entry qualifications or other student entry characteristics. Action must be taken when at-risk behaviour is observed.
7. Work should be undertaken in **partnership with staff and students** to review data and experience about student belonging, retention and success. Change should be implemented across the student lifecycle and throughout the institution at all levels, and its impact evaluated.

## Institutional reflective checklist

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The following reflective questions are offered as a starting point to assist institutions in reviewing their approach to nurturing a sense of belonging, and enhancing student engagement, retention and success.

1. To what extent does the institution actively nurture a culture of belonging to maximise the retention and success of all students?
2. To what extent do all staff feel responsible for student belonging, retention and success through accountability, recognition, support and development and reward structures?
3. To what extent is student belonging, retention and success mainstreamed into pre-entry interventions, transition and induction, learning, teaching and assessment and professional services?
4. To what extent is high-quality, student-centred learning and teaching seen as integral to student belonging, retention and success?
5. To what extent does the institution develop the capacity – understanding, skills and opportunities – for all students to engage, belong and be successful?
6. To what extent does institutional data and monitoring support student belonging, retention and success through identifying poorly performing departments, programmes and modules, and student behaviour that increases withdrawal?
7. To what extent do all students feel like they belong at the university or college, and that they are supported to maximise their success?

## For further information and support

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Full references and a bibliography are published in the full report on the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme.

The full report, along with the seven individual reports from participating HEIs and the *What Works? Compendium of Effective Practice in Higher Education Retention and Success*, are available from the Higher Education Academy website, [www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk), or by emailing [retention&success@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:retention&success@heacademy.ac.uk)

## The What Works? projects

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The seven projects, involving 22 HEIs, who undertook the programme research and evaluation from 2008–11 were:

### **Project 1: A comparative evaluation of the roles of student adviser and personal tutor in relation to undergraduate student retention**

Anglia Ruskin University with Peterborough Regional College, College of West Anglia

Project lead: **Jacqui McCary, jacqui.mccary@anglia.ac.uk**

This project evaluated the relative contribution to undergraduate student retention made by non-academic student advisers, and academic personal tutors, especially in relation to four key areas of activity:

- Induction and early days experience
- Early identification of students at risk
- Support for students who seek help
- Dealing with academic failure

### **Project 2: Pathways to Success through peer mentoring**

Aston University with Bangor University, Liverpool Hope University, London Metropolitan University, Oslo University College Norway, Oxford Brookes University, University of Sheffield and York University Canada

Project lead: Jane Andrews, **j.e.andrews@aston.ac.uk**

This project examined the role of peer mentoring in improving student retention and success, and sought to establish the efficacy and effectiveness of different models of peer mentoring in increasing student retention, through a sense of belonging and enabling success.

### **Project 3: 'Belonging' & 'intimacy' factors in the retention of students**

University of Leicester

Project lead: Annette Cashmore, **amc19@le.ac.uk**

This project analysed institutional data and undertook qualitative research with students to explore the factors associated with “feeling a belonging to the Institution/department” and “the intimacy of the Institution and its staff”.

### **Project 4: Dispositions to Stay: The Support and Evaluation of Retention Strategies Using the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI)**

Northumbria University with Universities of Bedfordshire and Manchester

Project lead: Jamie Thompson, [jamie.thompson@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:jamie.thompson@northumbria.ac.uk)

This project examined the relationship between learning dispositions and retention and success in higher education. It explored the value of developing a student's sense of learning and their understanding of their development as an independent, self-regulating learner to improve student retention and success.

### **Project 5: HERE! Higher education retention & engagement**

Nottingham Trent University with Bournemouth and Bradford Universities

Project lead: Ed Foster, [ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:ed.foster@ntu.ac.uk)

The HERE Project investigated two areas of work:

- What impact does doubting have on retention and what can we learn from doubters who persist?
- What successful actions do individual programmes take to support retention?

### **Project 6: Comparing and evaluating the impacts on student retention of different approaches to supporting students through study advice and personal development**

University of Reading with Oxford Brookes University

Project lead: Sarah Morey, [s.morey@reading.ac.uk](mailto:s.morey@reading.ac.uk)

This project compared and evaluated different approaches to supporting students. Reading offers a centrally provided and promoted joined-up package of study advice and support, personal tutorial and PDP for all students. Oxford Brookes has developed the Personal & Academic Support System which is delivered at local level in the School of Life Sciences.

### **Project 7: Good Practice in Student Retention: an Examination of the Effects of Student Integration on Non-Completion**

University of Sunderland with Newcastle University and University of Hull

Project lead: Anne Boyle, [anne.boyle@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:anne.boyle@sunderland.ac.uk)

This project evaluated the effectiveness of interventions to improve student integration for students from specific groups who have higher than institutional average rates of withdrawal:

- Local students
- Mature and part-time students
- Engineering students

## Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Paul Hamlyn Foundation is one of the UK's largest independent grant-making organisations. It works across the UK through three programmes – Arts, Education and Learning, and Social Justice. Each comprises an Open Grants scheme, to which organisations can apply with proposals for funding innovative activities, and Special Initiatives, which are more focused interventions that aim to have a deeper impact on a particular issue. The Foundation also has a programme of support for NGOs in India. The mission of the Foundation is to maximise opportunities for individuals to realise their potential and to experience a better quality of life.

The PHF Education and Learning programme supports the development and dissemination of new ideas that can make a significant contribution to young people's learning and achievement. We often seek to stimulate system-wide changes and to support work which others may find challenging or which requires long-term solutions. We often work in partnership with government or other bodies to achieve maximum impact from our support.

[www.phf.org.uk](http://www.phf.org.uk)

## Action on Access

Action on Access is the national provider of coordination and support for widening participation and access to higher education in the UK.

We advise and support colleagues working in access, widening participation, and student success and retention, whether they work in higher education providers, collaborative outreach partners, stakeholder organisations and funders, or as independent educational consultants. We have a strong commitment to contributing to a coordinated national strategic approach and support for broadening access and widening participation. Action on Access works with institutional leaders and practitioners, policy makers, funders and stakeholder groups to promote inclusivity and diversity, challenge exclusion, and to lobby for the broadest possible access to higher education which will, in turn, contribute significantly to greater social mobility.

[www.actiononaccess.org](http://www.actiononaccess.org)

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## HEFCE

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) promotes and funds high-quality, cost-effective teaching and research to meet the diverse needs of students, the economy and society. Our responsibilities are to develop policies, distribute funds, safeguard quality and assure the proper stewardship of public money. We work closely with universities, colleges and other partners to achieve excellence and impact in education and research, and to provide opportunities for all those who have the ability to benefit from higher education. For the academic year 2011–12, HEFCE distributed £6,507 million of public money to 130 universities and higher education colleges, and 124 directly funded further education colleges.

[www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk)

## Higher Education Academy

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is a national body for learning and teaching in higher education. We work with universities and other higher education providers to help bring about change in learning and teaching. We do this to improve the experience that students have while they are studying, and to support and develop those who teach them. Our activities focus on rewarding and recognising excellence in teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and helping to influence, shape and implement policy – locally, nationally and internationally.

[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)