March 2010
Student Departure and Persistence at the University of the Arts, London

Summary

UAL commissioned this research in October 2008 to investigate students' early departure. There were two main concerns: the first was to explain the range of retention rates in different courses across the University; and the second was to examine the disparity between retention rates for white and minority ethnic groups; and students from low and high socio-economic classes.

Ten courses were selected from four colleges of UAL which varied in size, discipline, student intake and pattern of student retention. There were interviews with 41 withdrawn students (from 2007/8) and 72 current students (from 2008/9). The research draws on these interviews, meetings with course directors and tutors, teaching observations and statistical data for the last five years.

Contrary to the findings of the literature review (Sabri, 2008) this study indicates that day-to-day learning and teaching issues are not the primary factor in bringing about student departure. Issues relating to course management and resources, particularly the stability of course directorship, are the most crucial in determining the fluctuations of student retention rates. When we look at course retention rates over the last four years it is evident that 67 courses appear at one time or another in the lowest quartile. Only 4 of these are consistently in that group. The vast majority appear in only one year. This suggests that course retention rates cannot be explained by factors that can be assumed to apply uniformly across time and course contexts. They are best understood in the context of course narratives that are situated in time, space and institutional structures and politics.

When there are frequent changes or absences in the role of course director, there are breakdowns in communication with students, lapses in course organisation and discontinuities in personal relationships which result in students' disengagement. These breakdowns seem to have a disproportionately larger effect on students from minority ethnic groups and lower socio-economic classes who tend to have less family experience of HE and fewer personal resources that would mitigate against course instability.

A simple overview of student retention statistics over the last five years indicates there is a gap between the retention rate of white and minority ethnic groups; and between students from lower and higher socio-economic classes. This qualitative study indicates that there are also differences in the factors that motivate students from these groups. First generation entrants (usually from lower SEC) are more likely to leave because of reasons relating to a lack of resources whereas their second generation counterparts tend to leave because of losing interest in their course. Less pronounced but similar differences can be observed between minority ethnic and white students respectively.

There are a number of lesser factors that also contribute to student departure. These are: clarity of course definition and relationship with industry; and students' values and assumptions in relation to their course. While student persistence is aided by social integration, students rarely point to its lack as a primary cause of departure. In addition, course and college reputation and perceived value in leading to future employment or status were significant factors in students' persistence.

Introduction

This investigation into student departure and persistence at UAL was informed by a literature review (Sabri 2009) which drew attention to the importance of giving due consideration to which students leave, when, why and what their new destinations are. As well as addressing these questions regarding student departure, this research turns its attention to student persistence.

The literature review also argued for a conceptualisation of student departure and persistence as the product of an interaction between students and their course and university environment (e.g. Tinto, 1993). The adoption of this theoretical starting point implies that students are not seen as 'bound to leave' or of being 'in deficit' as a result of leaving and neither are tutors or course directors seen as 'to blame' for student departures. As will become clear the roles played by students and staff are complex and need to be understood within a social, political and historical context.

This research examined a set of 10 course contexts in order to understand why and how students persist or leave. It explores the parameters of students' agency at a day-to-day level by analysing the accounts of current students, some of whom thought about leaving and didn't, and the recollections of students who left, and, in some cases, came back. These students' stories are set alongside an account of fast-changing environments at a course level, presided upon, though perhaps not wholly controlled by, course directors and their colleagues. This research did not include interviews with Deans or other managers who influence the environment within which course directors and students operate.

The research methodology was mixed. I drew on quantitative analysis to identify broad trends and collected qualitative medium-grained data in an attempt to explain the statistical data. Ten courses were identified to reflect a range of colleges, disciplines, and size of course. In addition, some courses were selected because of particular features: e.g. a dramatic increase or decrease in student retention or a persistently low or high student retention rate. The appendices contain more information on the research methodology and instruments.

The process of interpretation and analysis is only partly represented in this document. This research has been constructed as an instrument of dialogue, facilitated by a researcher, but owned and influenced by UAL staff. Each of the courses that participated has its own set of findings, in most cases produced jointly with the researcher. These course-level reports are an important back-drop to this institutional report in that they are another set of data that can be the basis for discussion between course directors and their teams (and where appropriate, students), and course directors and institutional managers.

The report is structured as follows:

An overview of student retention over the last five years

A brief statistical description of student retention rates at UAL that demonstrates how much diversity and fluctuation underlies an apparent year-on-year consistency at an institutional level.

On coming to UAL and leaving

This section analyses the interviews with 41 students who withdrew or left at the end of 2007/8.

Staying at UAL

This section draws on the ten course reports to give an overview of the factors that seemed to underlie students' persistence during their first year.

Students' stories

This section presents a series of case studies constructed from the interviews with students. Each case-study is a composite of several students' experiences. The purpose of these case studies is to provide a basis for discussion primarily among tutors, technicians and administrators who support students' learning. These case studies could also be used in discussion with students and by managers wishing to reflect on policy development.

Course narratives

This section presents a series of case studies of the management and resourcing of courses over a number of years. These case studies too are composites, drawn primarily from the courses that participated in the research. The issues they raise are not specific to one or two courses: they are typical of courses across the University that share similar characteristics. For example, some issues are typically faced by small courses, another set of issues are faced by courses that have recently made a transition from being pathways to becoming courses in their own right. These case studies are provided for managers at institutional and college level and for course directors, all of whom may wish to reflect on their role and the way it is situated within the University.

Discussion

This section gives an overview of the themes that seem to be raised by the research and that would benefit from further reflection.

What now?

This section sets out a programme of dissemination which informed the recommendations, as well as the recommendations themselves. A series of discussions were held with course directors who took part in the research, and a range of other colleagues, informally in a meeting held on 5th March and formally in ASDC subcommittees on Learning and Teaching and Widening Participation. The purpose of these discussions was to enable UAL staff, who make a difference to students' decisions to stay or leave, to use these research findings as the basis of further interpretation, sense-making and future action.

Note on student quotations
Each student quote is identified with a student number
G1 or G2 = first or second generation
em or wh = ethnic minority or white
c or w = current or withdrawn
R = repeated a year
Numbers = unique student interview number

There are also some quotations from focus group discussions where each student is referred to as S1, S2 etc.

Overview of student retention over the last five years

The figures below show that at an institutional level the rate of retention has been fairly stable, with a slight rise in 2008/9.

The difference between rates for white and ethnic minority students, and low and high socio-economic classes is pronounced. The difference in ethnicity is not shared in national trends.

	* 2004-5	* 2005-6	2006-7	2007-8	2008-9
Enrolments in the first year	3890	4064	4269	4386	4575
Retention rate yr 1 to yr 2 (%)	**85.4**	**85.9**	**84.9**	**82.7**	**85.4**
Total number who left	566	571	646	759	669
White (%)	87.4	87.8	86.8	85.1	87.6
Minority ethnic (%)	73.3	80.2	80.8	75.5	80.8
Lower SEC (%)			84.0	79.6	84.1
Higher SEC (%)			86.9	85.7	86.6

* The census date for these two years was December. Therefore it does not include students who enrolled and withdrew early within their first term.

When we look at the courses within the lowest quartile over four years (2004/5 – 2007/8) we find that:

67 courses appear at some point in this list.

42 appear once
14 appear twice
5 appear three times
4 appear 4 times

Of the courses that took part in this research 8 were among the list of 67.
4 appear once
1 appears twice
2 appear 3 times
1 appears 4 times

The course narratives on page 25 go some way in explaining what lies behind these patterns in variation.

On coming to UAL and leaving

This section draws primarily on interviews with students who withdrew during 2007/8 or left at the end of that year. They were interviewed between April and August 2009, so some 10-18 months after they had left. In a few cases interviewees had transferred to other courses within UAL or were in fact repeating the same course.

Comparisons between this cohort of withdrawn students with the current students of 2008/9 are made in what follows. However, this comparison has its limitations because the withdrawn students are speaking about events in their past whereas the current students are speaking about their present and more immediate past experiences. The comparison between the two cohorts of students has been more fruitful at a course level because the students' accounts relate to the historical development of courses.

The course-level analysis resulted in the identification of different student orientations to their courses. Some students perceive themselves to have a low level of agency in relation to the extent of their commitment, their interaction with other students, how they are assessed and what they get out of their course as a whole. Others appear to have a high level of agency which entails a clear purpose and an active stance toward all these aspects of the course. These students tend to take responsibility for their experiences rather than feel that they are being subjected to a process largely beyond their purview. These orientations are not mutually exclusive attributes of 'types' of student. Rather they are clusters of underlying assumptions and values that they express when talking about a course. As demonstrated below, some students held contradictory values which seemed to suggest that they were making transitions from low agency to high agency orientations during their first year. Reference will be made to these two orientations in the analysis that follows.

Coming to UAL

A common feature of students' motivation in coming to UAL is a high degree of intrinsic interest in the subject of study or practice. There are very few courses that accommodate students who have a desire to gain a generic degree in higher education in the way that some of the humanities or social science subjects might.

As was demonstrated in Yorke and Longden (2008) in relation to art and design students in general, UAL students tend to be most concerned about their subject of study and learning and teaching, as opposed to extra-curricular issues when giving feedback about their courses . This seems to imply an intrinsic interest in the subject of the course which was very common within this study. Some spoke of having 'a passion' for their subject as a result of doing short courses, and others of having 'set [their] heart' on it from a very early age.

> I knew I wanted to work in a three-dimensional way [G1/wh/w/99W]

> [This] was the only course I was interested in. It related to [different subjects]. It's nearest to my practice. [G2/em/w/93]

As part of that sense of purpose they sometimes have specific expectations of how their chosen subjects should be taught

> There were lots of people complaining, saying the same things about there not being enough teaching. I'm not the kind of person who waits for a tutor to do things for me but you do need some intellectual strength in the education that's being provided. There are certain subjects where you have to open a book, things are complex, you need to show, you put it up on a screen or somehow make it apparent. We had none of that. We did have a History of [subject] course but all it was [not specific enough to the course subject]. There was only one [practitioner] teaching in the whole department – that's a bit short. [G1/wh/w/38]

This well-defined sense of purpose was by no means universal. It seemed less common among students who had enrolled for purely instrumental reasons (just two students fitted into this category). One had 'ended up' on a course because it was the only one that s/he could transfer to after finding that another newly set up course was 'a complete mess'. Another had enrolled with the intention of transferring to another more competitive related course.

In some instances a sense of uncertainty about the focus of a course was mirrored in the motivations of the students who were attracted to it. In some cases these were early versions of new courses that later refocused and became more clearly defined or merged with others. Students who enrolled on courses that were perceived as 'open' sometimes had fairly generic motivations, comparatively weaker than those of students on more specialist or established courses:

> There's no great story to [coming to choose this course]. I was doing business at College and I thought I'd specialise in one part of that. Marketing – it's like a tool, everything has got to be marketed hasn't it? [G1/em/w/19]

> I was going to do a Sports degree in September and then changed to [art and design course] because I thought it would be better money. [G1/wh/w/18]

Choice on the basis of reputation seemed a more common component in the motivations of students who withdrew than those who were current. Students who left tended to contrast the expectations they had build up on the basis of 'reputation' with their experience. What students mean by 'reputation' and what they think it confers is worth exploring:

> UAL has a good reputation as the best arts university. Initially I was torn between UEL (where I am now) and CSM. I went with CSM because the experience there was supposed to be amazing. [G1/em/w/37]

> I think I went there for the reputation rather than do lots of independent work. [G1/em/w/60]

> LCC and UAL have a good reputation. We were told that at college. But that's from 20 years ago. There's not much that's good coming out of UAL now. Congratulations to anyone who can get through three years of that madness.[G1/wh/w/17]

In the first two quotes 'reputation' denotes a kind of experience that students are expecting to be provided for them: they expect to undergo something transforming and that it will come from a source that is external to themselves: they do not expect 'lots of independent work'. The third quotation adds an additional sense of reputation as 'promise' of what a student will become as a result of that experience. These conceptions of reputation reflect low-agency orientations. The issue of reputation is explored further in the section on Staying at UAL.

Students' constructions of their courses were very much influenced by the way they thought their courses were situated within the institution. For example, some students on FdA courses saw them as a less competitive alternative to the associated BA course:

> I applied for the BA course and didn't get onto it. I realised the FdA would suit me better anyway because I was interested in it as a vocational course. I had done [another course] and found it to be very open-ended. I wanted taught-time. We had lots of workshops on the FdA…. It was hard to stay motivated.

> There were a lot of other students but no-one was working very hard. I don't know what the tutors could have done. It seemed to be mainly a course for people who didn't get on to the BA There was a bit of a culture of that. [G2/wh/w/11]

However, what can also be seen from the quote above, is that some FdAs forged a positive identity that distinguished them from the BA. Reputation could also be constructed as exclusivity. CSM and Chelsea were most often mentioned as having a reputation for competitiveness and by implication as exclusive. Reputation is a highly contextualised construct though, as the following quote illustrates:

> My friend said that LCC was one of the best universities that we would ever get to, if we get in anywhere. The school told us that we weren't allowed to apply.
> Interviewer: Why was that?
> Because it's too competitive, lots of international students. We sent the applications in anyway and we got in with flying colours. [G2/em/w/15]

Being in London has the potential to act as either a catalyst for or a barrier to integration. Students who withdrew were more likely to make negative comments about being in London than current students who tended to make positive comments about its advantages. The negative comments revolved around the difficulties of keeping in touch with peers outside of the formal timetable when they live 'all over London'. Several students in halls of residence complained about the absence of students from within their course from their hall. A few students recalled orientation exercises or first assignments that had encouraged them to become familiar with various galleries or other resources in the city and these were positive experiences, especially for international students. For many living in London was a skill that had to be mastered, in addition to the social and intellectual transition that is part of higher education in any location.

Leaving UAL

The table below summarises the predominant reasons for leaving among the 41 students who withdrew in 2007/8. 'Predominant' reason was not always clear cut and in many cases it was difficult to pin-point just one factor above others. It was inferred by looking at each student's narrative as a whole and paying particular attention to their new destinations. In reality, there were often multiple reasons for leaving which acted in combination.

Predominant reason for leaving	1st generation	2nd generation	White	Minority ethnic	Total
Losing interest in the course (total)	**6**	**13**	**9**	**9**	**19**
a) interest in the subject	4	4	4	3	7
b) realising interests are more academic	0	2	1	1	2
c) finding the course is too structured/constraining	0	3	2	1	3
d) finding the course is not challenging enough	2	2	1	3	4
e) job offer	0	2	1	1	2
Poor results despite continued interest	**3**	**3**	**2**	**4**	**6**
Lack of resources (total)	**10**	**5**	**5**	**10**	**15**
a) lack of tutor attention	5	2	3	4	7
b) lack of facilities	1	1	1	1	2
c) lack of structure	2	2	1	3	4
d) conflict with tutor	2	0	0	2	2
Personal issues	**0**	**1**	**0**	**1**	**1**

The largest category above is of students who left because they had lost interest in the subject of the course. This motivation for leaving is evenly distributed among white and minority ethnic groups but concentrated among second generation rather than first generation entrants.

The following two quotations are from first generation entrants:

> I was doing a BA and because it was a new course, it was ridiculous. It was so bad, you didn't even know the timetable. When I asked I was told to go away. So I changed course, I knew I couldn't stay on that course and stupidly, I thought, I didn't want to go home. So I just transferred to any course I could. Another one I could have gone to was book-binding and I definitely didn't want that! [G1/wh/w/17]

> When I was looking for a course in [subject] it sounded really interesting but not once I started. It was theory based in its teaching. They wouldn't explain much. It was different to my expectations. I really thought it would be more of a practical course and in the way it was taught. [G1/em/w/69]

These next two quotations are from second generation entrants:

> Around Christmas I started to think about leaving. It was nothing to do with the course but the subject. I realised I didn't want to do it. It was just a safe option. I realised it wasn't what I was best at. I really enjoyed the course and the college, it was a shame it just wasn't for me. [G2/wh/w/39]

> The course structure was really bad. It was dull and boring. I was interested in the theory but they went about it in such an awful way. It seemed like the lecturers were not that charismatic, they weren't really interested and buzzing. I started thinking about leaving around the Christmas period because I was given a job offer at home. It was a good one and I thought I should stick to it [a profession the student was in before joining the course]. [G2/wh/w/72]

There are some differences between the first and second set of quotations. The first two students seem more surprised, the very first is outraged, at the fact that their courses fall so short of their expectations. The first is at a loss as to how best to respond and ends up going from one 'ridiculous' course to another that is clearly not within his/her area of interest. The second two students that are quoted are much calmer, and more confident about seeking alternative paths whether within HE or not.

Second generation entrants seemed more likely to use course experience, in a very conscious and deliberate way, as a means of working out what they 'really wanted to do'. The underlying values here are of entitlement to higher education and of the idea that the purpose of higher education is to 'find out' what you are good at or what you want to be. For example, one student had dropped out of a fine art course at another university before enrolling on a graphic design course at UAL during which s/he enjoyed the theoretical element so much that s/he realised that his/her interests were in fact academic. The student is now pursuing a humanities course at an Oxbridge college.

The students who found their courses too structured or insufficiently challenging tended to have enrolled on courses that had an explicitly vocational and practical emphasis: FdA courses and BA courses with an emphasis on craft rather than design or art.

Finding that the course is 'not challenging enough' is a closely related category. It includes students who did not find the challenges that were set for them relevant to their prior expectations of what they would be doing. They were often students who wanted more 'structure' and to have something specifically from tutors that they would not get working on their own. These students did not necessarily have a low agency orientation: their wish for greater structure was rooted in a critique of the content and approaches adopted in their courses. They often went on to enrol in courses elsewhere in the same or similar subject.

Of the two students who left because of job offers, one went on to work within the field of the course and decided after experiencing several months of this work, that it was in fact 'the wrong field' and is returning to HE to study another art and design subject.

The lack of resources was the second largest motivation for students' departure. Here the pattern is reversed with respect to the generation of entrants: two-thirds of students in this category are first generation entrants and, in addition, two thirds are minority ethnic rather than White.

As the following quote demonstrates the resources that some students perceived to be lacking were not just the physical or technological but the intellectual basis upon which a course was founded, and the way it was situated in relation to the industry for which it sought to prepare its students:

> The level of the lectures and content wasn't up-to-date or inspiring enough. It's a very special industry and you need to have people who are active in it and dynamic. It was an old-school way of teaching a very new profession. You need studios and software – our school didn't get new resources. We saw it allocated to other schools. [G2/wh/w/23]

However, the physical resources and space also mattered and influenced the morale of both students and staff. The student below refers to facilities at LCC:

> When we had classes upstairs, like the windows didn't open and there were 15 chairs for 22 people. So some people had to sit on the tables. I found it suffocating and uncomfortable. I went there for the university life as much as for the education. It didn't feel much like a university…I started thinking about leaving after Christmas or even just before. I started missing a few lessons and not coming in. I spoke to a teacher once about it and they said it wasn't in their power to prioritise things for us. [G1/em/w/19]

This quote draws attention to the way in which inadequate resources become a back-drop to feelings of being under-valued. The student feels frustrated not only at the lack of resources but also at the absence of a means to address it. S/he recounts a sense of powerlessness among the staff s/he encounters as well.

A lack of tutor attention was a relatively common motivation for leaving. The cumulative effect of feelings of exclusion is evident in the following quotes:

> I was not thinking about leaving. Tutors did not give me enough support. There was one project where we had to travel abroad – to Berlin. I couldn't travel abroad because of a complication with my visa – so I couldn't go. [G1/em/w/12]

> I left towards the end of the year. There were problems with other people leaving the course. The course director left and there wasn't enough interaction with the tutors that were left. …Assessment was good but the feedback I wasn't happy with. The tutors teaching were too thinly stretched over three years. I wasn't happy with it and thought I'd try elsewhere. [I wasn't happy with it because] certain members of the team had already made up their minds. [G1/wh/w/99]

The second quotation above also demonstrates how a lack of tutor attention comes about not simply through a day-to-day imbalance in how tutors use their time, but rather in the overall staffing and loss of staff that can affect the quality of interaction with students, for example in giving feedback.

Where students recounted instances of conflict with tutors, their stories where highly charged, with feelings unresolved about what they perceived to be deeply unjust experiences. These conflicts do not raise policy or strategic issues and so will not be explored here. They do however raise ethical issues in relation to future research with students who have withdrawn.

The incidence of poor results despite continued interest was evenly distributed among the different groups of students, though it is difficult to draw conclusions from such small numbers here. The following student refers to his/her need for a greater sense of direction and a feeling of being out of control:

> From Christmas time I was struggling. I'd got a low mark. I discussed it and tried to rectify it but it wasn't satisfactory. I usually work on a structure and didn't understand what was needed. It went from bad to worse. I got low marks in essays. The lectures weren't boring but I didn't find the theory interesting. I did it because I had to. [G2/em/w/93]

It is surprising that only one student left predominantly because of personal circumstances. This is not to say that personal issues were unimportant for other students. Many were coping with caring responsibilities for parents as well as children, financial difficulties, divorcing parents, relationship breakdowns and housing problems. Although these problems contributed to students' leaving they did not seem to be the primary cause. Several students who did withdraw

for personal reasons had returned to the same or other courses by the time they were asked for an interview.

Table of new destinations

Students' new destinations have already been discussed and are implied to some extent in students' motivations for leaving. However, the table below gives a detailed overview.

New destination	1st generation	2nd generation	white	Minority ethnic	Total
Another course within UAL	3	3	4	2	6
Repeating the year in the same course	1	1	2	0	2
Similar course elsewhere	5	3	3	5	8
Course in another subject elsewhere	5 (2 not in HE)	4 (2 not in HE)	3 (1)	6 (3)	9
Working	5	4	5	4	9
Nothing	1	5	4	2	6
Unknown	1	0	0	1	1

There seem to be few differences between 1st and 2nd generation entrants in terms of their new destinations after leaving. It seems to be the case that a lower proportion of minority ethnic students are retained in some capacity at UAL than their white counterparts who are more likely to repeat or transfer to another course within the University. 11 out of 20 minority ethnic students chose to study elsewhere, whereas 6 out of 21 of the white students did so. These numbers are somewhat small to enable generalisation but they fit with the disparity found in institution-wide statistics and therefore they raise pertinent questions for a larger scale collection of data through, for example, exit interviews.

Withdrawn students from 2007/8
21 women and 20 men
21 of the 41 students were first generation entrants
39 were home students and 2 international
7 were mature students and 34 under 22 years of age
20 White, 9 Black, 8 Asian, 2 mixed race, and 2 of other minority ethnicities.
20 did not have paid work whilst at UAL.

Staying at UAL

This section draws on the course reports to highlight some of the features of students' motivations to persist.

Coming to a course and first experiences

For current students, particularly those in courses with a high rate of retention, choosing a particular course and college rested on a range of elements: the fit of the course to their purposes (and they often had a highly developed sense of purpose); the perceived quality of the facilities; and the kind of social context and cultural capital that they thought a college would bestow.

Sometimes the unique characteristics of the course are used to justify students' choice or to explain that failure to get in to another course elsewhere was ultimately for the best. So rather than perceiving their second choice course as 'second best' persisting students learn to identify with its unique characteristics such that it becomes 'the best for them'. For example:

> Wimbledon wasn't my first choice. I wanted Chelsea because it's bigger but in Wimbledon you have the [subject] pathway and they initially teach techniques like…. I didn't get any feedback from [Chelsea. [G2/wh/c/81]

The student quoted above sees the absence of feedback from the college that rejected him/her as indicative that its larger size may be a disadvantage.

Within several courses students talked in glowing terms about introductory projects or exercises that enabled them to begin the process of acclimatising to the demands of their new course. In one course a collaborative introductory project gave students experience of working in two, three and four dimensions. The benefits are summarised in the following quote:

> I knew there were different styles of teaching, the tutors would leave you to it and you have to be prepared to have minimal attention. I was pleasantly surprised that we got more support than I expected. I expected to be left for a month after an introductory briefing. They gave us a good platform producing a 2D project which turned into a 4D. First we worked individually and then in groups of 4. It was also short and good for me because short periods of time – a week at a time. So not momentous, brisk and stimulating. Demanded getting ideas together. [It was also] especially good for people coming from school directly where you are hassled for any bit of work. [G1/wh/c/87]

And in another course:

> I did like that the tutors were very involved and aware of the transition we were making. [They] asked us to reflect in an introspective way and as a group. They set the ball rolling in helping us, they showed debate in a group that you needed to have within yourself. [G2/em/c/78]

These introductory experiences seemed to have succeeded because, as well as offering a substantive and structured induction to the course, they gave students a chance to get to know each other and their tutors. As a process for supporting students' transition from school or FE into HE, they succeed by providing a sound basis for students' social as well as academic integration.

This is not to say that the difficulties of making the transition were (or can be) eliminated. The following quote describes a process of adjusting over the course of the year as experienced by one student:

> The first term was full-on socially and for practice. It was busy – I was in a new country, new city and it was overwhelming. Then I dried off and thought now what? The third unit I overcame all that and began to work really hard. I wanted to prove unit 2 was a fluke and [make others] understand how I meant to work on this course. [G1/em/c/89]

There are some important implications in this student's account: first s/he is aware of his/her own potential, s/he has a sense of how s/he has done so far and of that assessment being shared by tutors.

Transitions and assessment: The 'woah factor'

> It's hard to crit your own work. I learn more from crits than from the assessment. Through talking you learn more. The percentage is useless. Pass or fail is not motivating. A percentage is not appropriate in art. [It's about] testing your work and getting different perspectives. The creator and the creation are independent, you can separate out the intention and the effect or the work itself and get to know more about it because you can get caught up with your own intention. The tutor analysed my work and character – it felt very naked but you learn a lot about yourself. The assessment can be arranged as an exhibition and detaches you from the environment. It's helpful because it replicates professional work but you want to know the rationale for their comments. The tutors aren't always able to talk about it but I know what I lack: a lifetime of research. There is consonance eventually after discussion. [G2/em/c/82]

This extended quote is typical of students with a high agency orientation with respect to assessment. In particular, the critical stance toward 'percentages' suggests that this student is not reliant on a favourable social comparison with peers, and instead stresses the value of learning about oneself through discussion of his/her work. Another element in this account is a conscious focus on an imagined post-course environment for which the student is preparing.

Among many students there was evidence of a transition having taken place from a low agency to a more active orientation:

> It's not a test of work this year because of the Woah factor of realising that we have to motivate ourselves. The ideas have been ok but not moved forward. We could do with more contact between tutors – we've got 2 across 3 years. [G1/wh/c/91]

The 'woah factor' seems an apposite description of the shock that is often experienced by students who have become used to, and perhaps dependent upon, a degree of attention and support at school or in further education that they feel is not provided in higher education. This student expressed the degree to which this is an emotional as well as an intellectual and creative challenge.

As the following quotes demonstrates, some students are deeply aware of the context within which assessment is constructed and of a problematic relationship between this context and future contexts beyond the course environment which are also socially contingent:

> I don't care about marks because even if I get very good marks it doesn't mean I'm a good artist or the opposite. So I just concentrate on finishing working.[G2/em/C/86]
> Often I can see what I'm doing wrong but I'm unwilling to change. When I get feedback - sometimes I agree with it, it's subjective. Assessment though is for grades and you change what you do to get a grade or you have to think what you are doing is important [regardless of the grade]. It depends what you want to get and what you want your outcome to be. [G1/wh/c/91]

For some students there was a degree of conflict between what they understood to be the basis on which they were assessed and the development of their work, as they perceived it:

> In the essays – I'm not sure written tasks are suited to everyone on the course. One assignment was writing a review. I've never had to do that before. We went to galleries and had to write about it afterwards and it was difficult. I thought I'd written what was expected. They said it was too journalistic but what's a review? I assumed it was like a newspaper review. Feedback was fair. It was harsh because the tutors marking were professional critics. The first piece was marked harshly and I was taken aback. [G2/wh/c/83]

It is often the case that transition from low to high-agency orientation is hindered by a gap between the student's assessment of her work and that received from a tutor. In struggling to explain this discrepancy, sometimes students react by questioning the credibility of tutors' expertise or the basis upon which they make the assessment. Occasionally students will also question their own criteria for assessment, as the student above is doing in relation to 'a review'. An important aspect of students' capacity to become connoisseurs of their own work is to acquire a (contingent and evolving) concept of what makes a good piece of work. This student seemed to be at a loss as to how to develop an idea of what a review is and simply sets up the tutor 'as professional critic', an authority with perhaps unattainable or difficult to comprehend standards.

For students with an assumption of lower agency, there was a feeling of powerlessness:

> When we got the assignments back I was disappointed with my score but it was top of my group. I couldn't see how to improve. There was no tutorial before submission. I don't know what direction I should go in – it's unpredictable. I wonder if they give you low scores in the first year as some kind of motivation? [G2/wh/c/29]

It is interesting to note that being 'top of my group' was a source of consolation for this student, an indication of the importance of favourable social comparison to sustain motivation. In addition, the assessment process and the rationale for it seem mysterious. Some students wanted continuity in the assessment process which they felt was prevented by the involvement of guest tutors who commented on their work:

> We need more guidance on how to improve. The tutors should have written comments in relation to previous work. Because in the last piece I'd worked on the feedback from the previous piece and there was no recognition of this. The marking seemed to be stricter. [G2/em/c/32]

While this student was able to observe differences in the assessment practice of different tutors, s/he lacks confidence to use this observation to interpret the feedback independently, and come up with his/her own assessment.

The following quote demonstrates how students are often struggling to develop confidence in their own capacity to judge ideas for themselves:

> There's a lot of feedback about where you've gone wrong and where to improve. The tutors help with ideas if you're stuck. They don't give you a straight answer but say something to question you to think about it which can be frustrating when you want a straight answer. It's a lot about independence and relying on yourself.[G2/em/Rc/31]

This quote also demonstrates that the student was conscious of tutors attempting to help him/her to develop this confidence rather than simply re-enforcing insecurities.

On the whole, instances of low agency orientations among current students were rare. Students operating with a low agency orientation tended to resent what they saw as a regime of 'do what you want sort of thing'. This was often contrasted with the presence of more structure and support in previous experiences of a Foundation course.
Sometimes they were evidenced in demands for more information about why they were doing what they were doing and how it fitted into the course as a whole:

> They need to tell us more about what we'll be doing in the second and third years. Reference to the handbook is not enough. We need to know in depth, it's different to be talked through it and we want to prepare for the second and third year. It would help us make informed decisions about staying or looking at alternatives. [G2/em/c/33]]

For this student there was not enough understanding of the rationale behind various tasks and activities: a need for explicitness was linked to a lack of confidence in the student's own capacity to benefit from the course and in the course itself:

> They said 'this term is about structure' I was like 'Really?' It didn't match my experience. I didn't understand the point of the exercise – like the chair – it wasn't explained in that way. [G2/em/c/28]

The student above has a desire to increase his/her sense of agency and wants to know more in order to take responsibility for the choices he/she makes. In contrast, the following quotation is from a student who gives the impression of being out of control and subject to a process driven by others.

> I got really good feedback but failed because I didn't do the writing. For the presentations I wasn't there because I came in late and failed the whole thing. I didn't know it was happening – I'd done the research.[G2/wh/c/80]

More commonly, even when feeling themselves to be challenged in a potentially undermining way, students sometimes appeared to have a sense of wending their way through a process, not necessarily with certainty but in a context in which they were taking responsibility for themselves:

> When I listen to people, I think I don't talk that way. I'm listening to understand, to understand what's said. I won't adopt what the crowd does or says. You need to back up what you're saying. For example, in the first assessment I thought I know about my work. But others were seeing references in my work which I didn't see. It left me not talking about my work. Now I'm comfortable with what I want to make and more confident in my own studio practice. People are always going to see references to other things. My own work comes from another place. It may visually look like that but it's coming from a different place. [G1/wh/c/77]

High agency orientations were sometimes expressed in tandem with scepticism about formalised ways of communication. The following student was asked about students' feedback to the course team:

> You know what? I don't see the point. If there's an obvious problem like none of the computers are working, you tell someone. I don't think about complaints on the course, I get as far as I can on the course. The course is what you make it. You have to be determined to make what you want to make. There's an abundance of resources, already which I'm not utilising. I'm not so specialised that I need particular books for example. I'm still very exploratory. So it's a matter of getting to grips with the resources that we have. So it's not a matter of thinking of problems with the course. [G1/wh/c/87]

High agency orientations with respect to assessment were most in evidence in two focus groups that were conducted with year 3 students of a course that had a consistently very high rate of retention:

> S1: My experience is that most of the time you get feedback but you don't get an actual percentage. Where I was before you got percentages all the time so its stops you doing the work for its own sake and you worked for the grades. Here stripping that means that you do it for the work itself.
>
> S2: So you do it because you like it not because you're trying to get anything out of it.
>
> S3: I think descriptive feedback is better. Like 80% doesn't mean anything. It doesn't tell me what was right and what was wrong with a piece of work whereas if I get some feedback – and even better if there's lots of criticism as well as the good points.

Interviewer: What do you think about that?
S4: Yeah you don't do it for the marks.

Interviewer: What about the quality of the feedback that you get?
S1: Well that depends on the tutor.

S3: This year it's more verbal than written which makes more sense because you can talk about it and get your point across.

S1: It's not a matter of – the assessment part of the project is just part of the process.

S2: It's less formal and less rigid. Otherwise you clutter it with the idea of being a teacher and a student.

S1: That's it, it's more of a dialogue. [03/F1/C]

Central to the way these students see assessment is their construction of authority. Whilst the tutor has an essentially administrative authority to determine the quality of feedback, the tutor's view is seen as contestable, part of a dialogue. Above all these students reject the arbitrariness of 'grades' and do not need the reassurance of favourable social comparison that goes with receiving good grades. Their focus, especially that of S1, is on the intrinsic interest in the task.

In the second focus group, there was also scepticism about the value of grades, but it was rooted in an argument about their lack of relevance in wider society:

S1: You don't go into a gallery and grade every piece of work. The reason for the mark is because it's a degree. We'll have to get marks for the dissertation.

S2: If you are a brilliant interactive designer, employers have to like your work, not your grade. [03/F2/C]

Social integration

While a lack of social integration did not appear to predominate in students' motivations for leaving, it was central to many students' motivations for persisting.

Students with a high agency orientation tended to be as concerned with their work as with getting to know other students and some seemed to gain a great deal from their peers. The following quote is typical of experiences in many courses:

The first couple of weeks I realised that working with other s was very good and I realised it was equal to other's work but different. We had good tutors who came round and looked at your work. Critique was constructive. If you asked questions they really helped. My confidence grew as I could see where my weak areas were and so I could gear my questions to that. The environment made me feel I was capable of doing it – tutors and students.[G2/wh/c/56]

On the other hand, within the same course as that of the student above, a feeling that there was no friendship within a class, made one student feel overly reliant on scarce attention from tutors:

The first weeks were difficult because I don't have friends in class. 85% are Chinese people and they stay in their own community. There are 3 or 4 people from here and they stay in their own community as well. So it's hard to know what's wrong or right – I have to rely on the tutor.[G2/em/c/54]

For this student, there was no-one with whom s/he could check her own understanding, and gain the kind of confidence that enabled the student quoted above to 'gear' questions most appropriately. The lack of social integration is a loss in itself and it also diminishes the students' capacity to use what tutors' attention she has to best advantage.

There was some evidence of a lack of interaction across ethnic groups, particularly where courses had a high intake of international students:

> The class is divided. The Asian girls stick together. I'm happy with my own friends, I'm not aware of any ill-feeling.[G2/wh/c/55]

> There is a language barrier, it's hard to understand some English people. Asians can understand each other even if there are Chinese or Malasian cultural references.[G1/wh/c/51]

While the barrier is attributed to 'language' there are also hints of a reluctance to engage with each other. However, there were also several examples of students who made concerted efforts to get to know their peers, particularly from other sub-groups within the cohort:

> I know a lot of people because of the [course] trip – I got to know people from other groups. Also last term we had seminars that combined with the other groups. But I don't get to see their design work. The benefit of seeing it is that you'd know where you stand within the group as a whole – at least with the ones who care. [G2/em/c/52]

A more complex picture emerges in this students' account where the division of groups is seen as being within the cohort sub-groups rather than along ethnic lines. Another student described the existence of 'an English group, an Asian group, and a rest of the immigrants group' and saw that these groupings were disrupted when one of the cohort sub-groups was merged into the others. This suggests that the way the sub-groups are constructed in large courses has an influence on the group dynamics within the course.

This student just quoted above also distinguishes between students with different levels of commitment to the course and is keen to seek out those 'who care.' This desire is related to a wish, particularly among high-achieving students, to see 'where they stand' in relation to the wider cohort of their peers. There is competitiveness here but also a wish to 'see things differently' as a result of a wider range of interactions.

To understand the significance of social integration for student persistence, it is worth turning once again to data from final year students. It was evident from the camaraderie among them (and from many NSS comments for this course) that the role of social integration was hugely significant for them. Whilst students may be motivated to apply by their intrinsic interest in the course subject and by the course and college reputation, these motivations combine with the sustenance provided by peers in enabling students to persist:

> Many talented and ambitious students gathered by the course motivated me to work hard. [NSS/030]

> The amount of support from peers is fantastic all are so talented and we sustain each other's development. We are very tight knit, we motivate each other and in a way, this is one of the best things about the course [NSS/037]

> The only things that make my studies worthwhile are the students that I've met.[NSS/047]

> The majority of the students are exciting to study with. [NSS/048]

It is evident that students are stimulated by each others' work and by a feeling of being associated with other talented people. This was clear in the focus groups as well as NSS comments. The last comment quoted above hints that not all students benefit from the social and cultural capital within the student cohort. Comments from the two students who withdrew from this course suggest that it is especially difficult to gain access to these forms of capital for *some* students who are (i) first generation entrants, (ii) have English as a second language, (iii) are of minority ethnic background, (iv) are unfamiliar with London.

Focus group participants told anecdotes about other students they had spoken to during the first and second year who had seriously considered leaving and who did so because they 'didn't get to know a single person'. A first generation student confided that she very nearly had left because it was 'hard living outside London'. There was no social space for people who come from further afield. People who can come in on a regular basis do have that space. This student went on to talk about space as being not just a physical experience but a feeling of confidence, of belonging, and a feeling of entitlement. Her geographical isolation was compounded by the social exclusion that she felt. The feeling of entitlement is harder to acquire for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly first generation entrants.

Speaking about the ways in which their views of the course subject had changed during the course, it was interesting that these students attributed their conceptual development to themselves and their peers rather than to the course curriculum:

> Interviewer: You attribute none of these changes to the course?
>
> I think it has nothing to do with the course. The course is all the students and people. That's what it is. It's not the structure of the course that brings about conceptual change it's the people and their work. It's self-motivation. If you put the effort in that's what you take out. [03/F2/C]

It was evident in the focus groups that the students did not necessarily arrive with this set of assumptions, they were acquired through their experience on the course:

> At the beginning it was frustrating, you didn't hear about things or you couldn't find the right room or the right person, but then you just sort of learn that if I chase them, to get a spot in a workshop, you get it. It's rewarding when you get it.
>
> The philosophy of the course is that you rely on yourself to take opportunities. The whole college is run this way. You have to change your own life. [03/F2/C]

These students have internalised the idea of 'fending for yourself' to the extent that they are motivated by the ethos, and they see it as an intrinsic part of *being* a student in this college and being on this course.

The question that arises then, is what is it that motivates students who are unhappy to persist? The significance of being at a particular college loomed large for several students who chose to persist despite their unhappiness:

> I didn't really like [the course] …but I stayed because [college] is an amazing place …I like what we do [03/F1/C]
>
> International college, famous globally, central London location [NSS/009]
>
> [The people in this college] are very clever in branding themselves to prospective students, in misleading them to believe they are a good leading art university. The have good industry [contacts] for design competition etc….they provide the university institution with plenty of money to pocket themselves. They certainly don't go towards facilities for students. [NSS/004]

This last quote encapsulates the feelings of resentment that lie behind NSS statistics. Many students feel acutely a mismatch between their prior expectations of their college and the level of resources that they experience to be on offer. The reputation of the course, and particularly its links with industry, offer a significant incentive to stay. The promise of the educational capital (including prospects for employment) that comes with completion is a significant factor. However, as well perceiving some colleges to have valuable currency, the shortcomings of a course can also be attributed to the college system rather than to course tutors:

> It's to do with how the course is organised. This tutor calculated how much the university actually pays him and he has 12 second per student a week. This is a tutor who is not doing it for the money – why should they bother? [03/F1/C].

High rates of retention in the case of this particular course can be attributed to:

1. The social, cultural and educational capital that students assume they will acquire from studying at particular colleges and within particularly stable courses.
2. Perceptions of the course as having currency among employers, evidenced in its strong links with industry
3. A high degree of reliance on peer support networks
4. A well-structured first year
5. Credibility of the tutors
6. Sympathy with the tutors
7. Aspects of the course with which the students can seem less happy (e.g. disruption of peer support networks by 'pathways') were in this case concentrated in the second year. Once students have reached this point they are unlikely to abandon the investment they have made unless difficult personal circumstances prevail.

The negative NSS scores in relation to a course with high retention rates can be interpreted as expressing how students feel having persisted, as they see it, *despite a lack of support and resources*, to complete the course.

Students' Stories

The names of colleges and individuals, and some minor details have been altered to protect students' anonymity.

Adam

2nd generation white home student

I did my Foundation at LCC. I didn't get into the BA course. I wasn't working that hard and was annoyed at the time. It was just that age. They recommended the FdA and I was concerned about the quality of it, the level, so I went and had a chat to Emma, the course director, and she reassured me.

What you find out when you start is that most people on that course are at a lower level than the foundation. There's not enough tutors and there's not enough space. In a way what I went through was a good thing – because I've sorted out what I want to do. It wasn't very organised. It's very basic and uncreative. It's like when you write an essay and there's a model essay that you have to get as close to as possible. In an artistic subject two pieces of work can be completely different and still be of the same quality. It was like there was a right answer.

Pretty soon into it I decided I wanted to leave. I had been really happy with my work the summer before the course and then I found the course really constricting. So I left before Christmas. I was really annoyed that my parents had paid 3K so I decided to use the school as much as I could. I still went in everyday and used the library and other facilities.

After I left, I still saw some of the students and they said it was still really bad. It was really unfortunate, the course director left and went to France, then there were two tutors left. Another had a serious road accident and so had to have some time off. So there was just one tutor left. They just had no contingency plan for that!

The other students were fine, nice people. I really like LCC. It's had its problems there but I'd have continued if they had a course [in the subject I now study]. And the library is good.

When I left I did another foundation at Chelsea and this September I'm starting a BA at Wimbledon.

Barham

1st generation Asian home student

I did a Foundation course at a local college. I was put forward by my tutor through some kind of compact with Chelsea. The tutor I spoke to said that he was sticking his neck out taking me but he would give me a chance.
It was good when I started but I didn't get along with the other students. Most of them were English. They didn't seem to like people from East London. Not too sure why. Some of them

thought I was going to rob them. They looked at me like they were scared and because of the way I used to dress.

On the academic side of things I asked the tutors for some help and they didn't help. I basically passed the projects where I had a bit of help and failed where it involved the computer software that I wasn't familiar with. Then at the end of the year, I got a letter saying I had to pay again for the projects I hadn't passed and I thought that's not on.

Most of the time I was there I was thinking about leaving - from before Christmas. Most of the time I was sitting on my own! They just didn't want to know.

Support from the tutors, help from the tutors would have helped me stay on. They were putting me down. There was one guy who used to come and see me quite often – from [another college] I think. He used to go through the work with me but he would just read it out and helped with the writing a bit. I used to tell him I needed help with the software but he didn't help with that.

My experience of the crits was really good. The tutors liked the work I was producing. The style of it was different to anything anyone else was producing. Other students produced the same kind of thing. I got good marks. I was surprised. I'd made no particular effort and done the minimum amount. I was expecting someone to say something. The course director who was the one who really got my work left and so there was no-one left that I really knew. The other tutors were … uninterested and grumpy.

Now I'm working as a make-up artist. I'd like to take [art and design subject] further and I would like to go back and get a degree. But I don't have firm plans yet.

Carolina

2nd generation mature international student

At the start it was my attitude to want to be given. This was in contrast to what they expect. The course structure seemed very experimental and not clear. Things weren't working properly – so many things have changed. Many people said the course was unstructured. Sometimes we didn't even know when we were supposed to go in. I felt disconnected from the course.

Little by little I saw how things work. There were times of thinking on my own and speaking to other people including foreign students in other universities. We saw that they expected us to be more self-learning. You have to be looking for it rather than having things delivered to you.

I started thinking about leaving when I realised I wasn't doing well. Really poor compared to what was expected. There were several factors – personal circumstances and problems, things to do with the course that were nothing to do with me. All combined with my attitude. I left in the first year in March. I realised I wasn't going to be able to pass or overcome being behind. I couldn't change anything.

My first problem in the course was with assessment. I didn't know how assessment works. I was naïve. I was not worried that I would fail. I hadn't read how assessment worked – for example that if you fail you have one more chance to submit. I didn't see the implications of that. I

realised afterwards. Now I do know that you have to achieve learning outcomes and that it's basically a system of ticking boxes and that other things don't matter…

What happened was that I'd done the assignment but had no bibliography. Just before handing in the assignment, I said casually to the tutor, 'By the way, I haven't done a bibliography.' He said, 'I'm going to have to fail you then.' The assignment itself is of so little importance and I had demonstrated that I could do a bibliography in another bigger assignment. But regardless of whether I know how to write a bibliography I was failed. It was a wake-up sign for me that I have to pay attention to 'outcomes'. The tutors are following rules – the teacher doing what they have to do. Because I had started the course 1-2 weeks late I'd missed the groupwork that led up to the individual work and so the first time around I didn't realise it had to be done. The second time around I made that silly mistake and failed. I'm not sure now why I didn't know – but the 'second' time I gave in the work was actually my first time.

So there was one subject I couldn't pass and so therefore it was pointless to carry on. I didn't know the implications. I wasn't told to leave but I felt discouraged. I was told it might be better to come back next year: 'Your situation is difficult' they said. Silly mistakes led to it. I continued but my motivation was low. I felt the teachers already wouldn't consider me as capable of passing – even as not passing.

It was a bad point for me to be alive. I had no support from anyone. One tutor in particular was very unsupportive and said maybe you should leave.

I decided to go back because I didn't know how well I could do. I didn't feel the tutors knew what I could do. I didn't think they should think that way. I knew myself better than them.

I left it one year before coming back – I fixed my personal situation because before I wasn't 100%. I came back with some resentment but trying to be positive. I had to work on making people who knew me to change their minds. The [repeated] first year went really well for me. They were waiting for me to fail and then they started realising and everything completely changed and they were praising and saying we're really happy with you. My marks are really good. I have to be focused – I take the course in a different way now.

Dora

1st generation white home student

I studied for BTEC in Manchester. The LCC course seemed suited to me from the research I did on the courses available. When I started it was daunting. It's such a big place and you don't have a place to meet people. You'd often get last-minute changes that they would just email or room changes without much notice.

I started thinking about leaving after the first couple of months. Early on I felt that you just got no teaching. You are meant to be working more independently and doing your own study but it seemed that you get more tutoring at other universities. I felt there was nothing being added to what I could do by myself. There was also no space to work, no-where to put your folder. I was actually told at one point that everything you learn you learn at home. That put me off.

I did enjoy the context part. I enjoyed the writing and there was more tutor input.

I don't think any support would have helped me stay on. I lost respect for the course and I was not getting anything out of it. Things were cancelled. We were given a reading list of books to be read before we got there and then when we got there they said 'read these' as though no-one had read them before. It was like they expected us to have not read them. You weren't pushed or challenged.

I didn't enjoy crits. I felt uncomfortable. We hadn't ever done it at college. I just didn't like them. I didn't agree that there should be no tutor input. Input from peers is fine but I wanted tutor input as well.

It was ok having outside companies involved in live projects. It was really competitive because all the students from all the years can take part. It can involve quite lengthy meetings with students overworking for no reason. I felt it was a waste of time and just an exercise of power for the companies. They had three stages of narrowing down students and then selected fewer and fewer. I only applied for one. I didn't agree with the process and it dragged on for a month. I think they expected too much.

I attended about 50 -60% of the time. The main reason was that I lived a 20 minute bus-ride away. When I started not going in, no-one called to say 'where are you?'

Getting to know other students was slow. I met some on Facebook who were in my group. I tended to go home at the week-ends and so didn't meet much outside college. Hardly anybody on the course was in halls of residence. I did enjoy it at first but I had no family or friends. I'd heard good things about it the course – awards and features in design magazines.

Now I'm trying to get a job – not related to art and design. I still want a degree and will do something either in art and design or English Lit up North.

Ellie

1st generation Black student

I did an Art Foundation in Cambridge and decided I wanted to do textile design. I went to London because the opportunities are there.

The first few weeks I enjoyed it but I was disappointed when we got the timetable. I expected more than three days – and three hours in each of the three days [in the Autumn term]. It's not enough for full-time study.

Given how little time we got and what I was paying the financial position was difficult with loans – put me in a negative position. I left at the end of the year. I didn't enjoy it and I wasn't doing that well in my work. It didn't seem much of a life. The social side was difficult in halls.

Assessment wasn't too bad. There wasn't much that was positive about it. It was negative and hurt my confidence. It's hits you hard and it's hard to pick yourself up again. I did improve but it didn't get me anywhere. I didn't see any progression in my marks. It was like they were marking to different standards.

My assignments weren't the best but that was because I didn't enjoy it. I thought I did good in the last project but obviously not. I gave up towards the end. I lost my motivation and

enthusiasm. I had done bits for it and thought it was much better. I used to make things a lot but I haven't got back into it since. I'd still like to.

I went in everyday even though there was nothing scheduled. Getting to know other students was nice but difficult because they live all over London. No-one else from the UK was in halls. Some of them had already been in unis before.

The facilities are good and you get help for everything. I think I went there for the reputation rather than do lots of independent work. I'd have stayed on at UAL maybe if I had a better basis, more personalised. Like someone there the whole time, not just when you're struggling.

Now I'm doing Business in another university. It's fine, it's good. Quite interesting. I'm working part-time as well. I'm progressing well.

Faisal

1st generation Black student

When I got there teachers were really nice. Then I had a couple of accidents, I dislocated my shoulder and missed a lot of work. I spoke to the head of the course about it. I handed in what I could and I got no results for that. I was asking if I could catch up over the summer. Because you get like 6 months off during the summer, don't you? So I am sure I could have done it. She said it was out of her hands.
I left at Easter

Getting to know other students was really good. I make friends easily. I made friends with one guy when I first went but when I went back after I'd dislocated my shoulder he had disappeared. So I made friends with these two girls and actually they were really determined to get me through the course. Yeah the students were really cool. I really liked the fact that it was a mixed uni. Not like other unis I've been to where everyone is black. It's more mixed, artsy. Has more personality.

I really wanted to stay on. When I tried to plead my case I didn't feel like anyone was fighting for me or that anyone cared. I was emailing lots of people about it. I would have thought I could catch up in the summer but no-one wanted to give me that chance.

UAL really need to think about who they are employing – at the moment they are just there to bring in the students, not help them. The tutors there shouldn't be there. I don't know how it can be that we pay so much money to be treated so poorly. They really need to have it addressed. They need to retrain or get other tutors in. It's just not on and it gets brushed under the carpet. I feel I wasted a whole year of my life at UAL.

Course Narratives

The following course narratives do not correspond to any one course that participated in the research. They are composites and details have been changed to maintain their status as hypothetical case studies for discussion. They highlight problems to provoke debate.

Questions to address in relation to the narratives:

1. What is the central problem in this case?
2. What is at stake (risks and opportunities) from the perspectives of the students, course director and managers?
3. What action should be taken? By whom?

Narrative A: BA in an art subject

This long-standing and well-established course has good links with high-profile practitioners and a strong reputation that attracts around 5 applicants for every place. For several years its founding director has built up the course team which by 2007 was composed of two full-time, two part-time and several AL.

However, in 2007/8 two staffing issues arose in quick succession which resulted in a degree of instability that was devastating to that year. The departure of the course director left the course team somewhat understaffed. Then later in the year, the other full-time tutor had to take leave of absence for several weeks because of a family bereavement. This left a somewhat less experienced part-time tutor in an acting course director role trying to co-ordinate increased contributions from ALs. In the perception of the students on the course, it was surprising that 'there were no contingency plans for that' in place. An unusually large number of students left – 45 out of a cohort of 120.

A lack of stability and support was attributed to the understaffing by some students. However, most students simply experienced a lack of attention and with few exceptions, those who left felt that more attention from tutors might have made a difference to their decision to leave.

Narrative B: FdA in a design subject

A newly appointed course director inherited a somewhat badly organised course where many students who enrolled had previously applied for and failed to gain a place on the BA course in the same subject. The new course director steadily built student and staff morale by developing a new course identity that ran through course marketing materials, course induction and first year transition arrangements, the curriculum as a whole and course team development sessions. The FdA now stood for an emphasis on links with industry including developing personal networking skills, readiness for employment, and self-branding. There were also plans afoot to develop peer mentoring links with the associated BA.

In 2007/8 the course director went on maternity leave. She left clear hand-over information and offered briefings for her successor. No acting director was appointed. The course director's teaching was covered but no-one took over the overall leadership of the course.

The incumbent course director returned full-time after six months away to find 40 formal complaints from students about lapses in assessment practice and confusions over time-tabling of sessions. Contacts with businesses in industry who had previously supported the courses in various ways (giving workshops, providing work internships etc) had lapsed and in some cases broken down. An unusually large number of first years left – 8 out of a cohort of 30. Some who had been recruited after speaking to the course director felt they had no connection with any members of the course team. 'No-one knows your name' as one student put it.

Narrative C: BA in a craft subject

The students on this course feel a great deal of resentment toward the University and their college which they think does not properly resource its courses. The fees seem to go on courses in other schools. One tutor recently told his students that he calculated that the University allows him 2.5 minutes per student in tutorial time. In addition, the first year students are aware that a specialist tutor who comes in to teach a basic technique comes in for only 8 weeks of the term because of a lack of funding. This is a source of some frustration because this tutor is in much demand. The students resent what they see as the University's policy to pack in as many students as possible for the sole purpose of maximising its income.

The course director, along with others in the college, has recently been told that contact hours are to be cut from the following year. However, he was also explicitly told not to refer to 'a cut in hours' but to call it an 'enhanced curriculum development' where students will be encouraged to reflect upon and direct their own learning.

The course director feels opposed to the cut in hours but understands the financial constraints that necessitate this. He is somewhat concerned that the proscribed use of language is disingenuous to say the least. He is embarrassed and demoralised by the decisions that senior managers make. Just as he is considering how to deal with these concerns, a junior colleague from his course team enters the room and asks to be reimbursed for the costs of providing tea, milk and biscuits for the whole team. The course director laughs at the idea that there would be a budget for that! The junior colleague is out-of-pocket and, in this atmosphere, is somewhat less inclined to do as much out-of-hours work patiently supporting students as she has been doing for most of the year.

Narrative D: BA in a vocational/professional subject

This is a newly established course in a subject that has not been taught at UAL before. It is unusual within its school as well as in the University as a whole. It is entering a market that is dominated by other institutions and needs to establish its credibility with prospective employers, especially those that may be able to provide student placements and internships.

As they arrive many of the students are aware of the newness of the course and many are attracted by its innovative approach to the preparation of professionals in this field.

Some however are perturbed by the absence of information about how the course will develop in the second and third year. They want an overview and seek information about courses at other institutions which seem to differ markedly from that taken by their own tutors. Attendance starts to wane among some and a significant proportion, around a third of a cohort of 90, leave during the first year.

A new stage 1 leader is appointed in the following year and has the task of taking on a new cohort of students in the knowledge that there is a good chance that the University will close down the course. Both the course team and the students have to live with this uncertainty throughout most of the academic year.

Narrative E: BA in a design subject

A newly merged course of around 80 students in the first year is led by an acting course director. She has been 'acting' in this role for more than two years. Prior to her arrival the course had 4 course directors in as many years and the retention figures had slumped. They had risen again because she has made a huge difference to the course, introducing a highly effective orientation module that both introduces the students to their subject matter and enables them to get to know one another. Despite the size of the course there is a warmth and camaraderie among the course team and the students.

Personally the course director is under a great deal of stress. In the hope of gaining a permanent appointment she has given up her own practice and teaching at another prestigious institution in order to plough all her efforts into this course. The students do not know that the job of course director will be advertised and she does not want to introduce a sense of instability by telling them.

She feels vulnerable as an acting director and has been coping with an unfilled part-time (0.8) vacancy on her team by drawing on ALs. She is reluctant to press her case to her line manager (to fill the vacancy) and fears being perceived as someone who 'pesters' people. There is therefore no other staff member on the course team.

There is a sense of continuing delay while the college re-structures a range of courses with associated implications for various posts. In the meantime, the prestigious institution for which she has previously taught is about to advertise a post in the acting course director's area and she has been invited to apply.

Discussion

Students' development within the first year can be conceived in terms of changing assumptions and values in relation to the course and their orientation towards it. Some students seem to have a high level of agency from the start, with minimal recourse to tutor support but with the need for a credible and sound structured curriculum with which they could engage. Other students adopt a low agency orientation, often they retain an assumptive world gained during a Foundation course or another environment that they recall as having a greater level of contact than they are now experiencing. Students with a low sense of agency are reliant on an external validation of their worth as practitioners and students and struggle to maintain a feeling of control and responsibility for their experience. This feeling can be exacerbated in some course environments. In others it is challenged in a way that enables students to take the emotional and intellectual risks that are part of the transition to a high agency orientation.

Peer support (as well as interaction with tutors) influences students' capacity as agents. Many students are able to engage and make use of their peers' support but need frequent small-group or one-to-one support in order to make a transition from FE-level structure to HE independence. The more aware they were of a process – for assessment, curriculum development and tutor support – the more students were able to engage with it in a critical and active way. There is evidence that these orientations persist into later years, both were in evidence among the small number of year 3 students that were interviewed.

We need to distinguish between those who leave for sound and unavoidable reasons, that are out of the control of course teams and UAL as a whole, and those whose departure is an indication of a perceived short-coming within UAL. That said, what constitutes sound and unavoidable departures is highly contestable. Some would argue that there is a degree of 'natural wastage' in all courses. Interviews with a sample of 41 students suggest that a minority, about a quarter, will have left regardless of staffing levels – for personal reasons or because their academic and vocational interests have shifted. The students within this group are evenly distributed in terms of their social and racial backgrounds. However, it is clear that another group of leavers retain a strong interest in the subjects of the courses that they left but are choosing to pursue it at other colleges and universities; not necessarily for personal reasons but because they felt the provision for them was inadequate in some way. There are still others who would have liked to stay on but failed their assessments. These kinds of departures seem to be preventable. There is evidence, in the exploration of predominant motivations for leaving, that first generation and minority ethnic student-leavers are over-represented in this group.

The evidence suggests that when course direction and organisation is weak and perceived to be so, students with fewer personal resources seem to be affected first. Some courses are more vulnerable than others to the effects of staff departures or changes. A small course team means that if one person leaves, particularly a course director, the impact on the students' environment is considerable. Furthermore, a prolonged period of reliance on 'acting' course leaders can cause uncertainty and instability for both the course team and students involved.

On the other hand, small courses can be experienced as 'safe environments' which provide students with the support they need in a time of sometimes difficult transition into HE. Once that is achieved, there seems to be a greater need among students to build links with peers from other year-groups and other courses. This point has not been explored within this report but emerged in several course-level reports. Another feature of small courses is that the students are much less reliant on and put little trust in formal documentation (such as the handbook) and processes (e.g. feedback to the course team). The immediacy of face-to-face relationships with tutors seems to render these superfluous. However, while this works when there is stability in

the course directorship and course tutors, it creates a degree of risk given the absence of back-up arrangements.

Unlike students on smaller courses, students in larger courses did not seem to hanker after contact with peers from other courses. Occasionally they mentioned contact with peers from other year-groups but they seemed content with the variety and size of their own cohort. The size of the course also means that students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives from multiple tutors: indeed formative assessment is designed to provide at leas t two tutor perspectives on students' work. There is evidence in the students' accounts that this promotes an independence of mind and a capacity to develop their own assessments of their work, intrinsic to a high agency orientation. These observations about smaller and larger courses suggest that different strategies will be appropriate to courses according to their specific features and context of operating: size is one such feature.

Another feature that seemed pertinent to students' persistence and departure was the extent to which courses 'recruited' or 'selected' students. Many well-qualified, able students who are deliberating about their choice of course place a great deal of trust in the advice they receive from the course directors that they meet. They are unaware that courses have to meet targets and face serious resource implications if they over-recruit or under-recruit. They are re-assured or re-directed in ways that sometimes turn out to be wrong for them. Some courses provide practical experience, for example through group discussion, of course content and mode of interaction, as a means of helping students and tutors make decisions before enrolment.

International admissions emerged as a factor that could dramatically change the environment within which course directors and their teams are operating. At the same time there seems to be little knowledge about how international students are recruited and how decisions about their numbers are made.

In this fast-changing and somewhat precarious environment, a great deal seems to depend on the stability provided by course directors. Resources are undoubtedly scarce and getting scarcer but there are also costs associated with insufficient back-up to provide for unforeseen and unavoidable absences or departures within course teams.

What now?

Communicating the findings and formulating recommendations

The dissemination process was conceived as a means not of simply communicating findings but as a series of stages in the analysis and interpretation of the data collected. Findings have been presented, at least in part, in the form of composite case studies with a view to stimulating discussion. The first stage of dissemination involved discussions of preliminary analysis with course directors. Each was presented with findings that relate to their own students and asked to respond. Their responses were then incorporated into a final set of course reports that focus on learning and teaching issues, and experiences of management.

The course directors were then asked to participate in two further ways: first they are meeting with the Dean of Learning and Teaching Development to discuss their experience of this project. Second they were invited to a meeting of all the course directors who participated in the research with the purpose of generating some recommendations. These were incorporated into a first draft of recommendations that was discussed with a group of some 20 colleagues who helped to refine them.

The institutional report is also being discussed with a range of committees and fora from late January 2010 culminating in the course directors' conference at the end of the year. The aim of these discussions will be to add a further layer of interpretation of the findings that develops our understanding of student retention at UAL. Specifically, the institutional and course reports should provoke debate about:

- The interpretation of the statistics (especially over time) in the light of the qualitative findings
- Factors that lie behind variation between courses, across years and between colleges
- The interplay between management issues and learning and teaching in contributing to student persistence and departure
- What further questions now need to be pursued
- Whether and how researching the experiences of withdrawn students can take place in future.

2009/10	Dissemination
October	2nd SMT Steering group for progress and dissemination plan.
November	Meetings with course directors/tutors on individual courses
id-December	
January	SMT Steering group meeting
February	L&T Sub-committee 2nd WP Sub-committee 2nd SU reps discussion
March	Meetings for Course directors – recommendations Research launch 5th Meetings with Deans and others, as appropriate 11th Academic Board Buddying and Mentoring Group CSM presentation/discussion
April May	
June	15th June L&T Subcommittee
July	Course Directors' Conference

Student Departure and Persistence at the University of the Arts London

Recommendations

These are the recommendations which arise from the research completed in 2010 on behalf of Academic Development and Services into student retention at UAL. Academic Board has endorsed these recommendations, and delegated responsibility to ADS for commencing the processes required to execute them.

Support for Students

Improve students' understanding of the purpose, structure and process of their course before registration and during their first year

1.1 Review processes for producing course information for prospective students to ensure they can use it to differentiate between similar courses, and that accurate, explicit information about any essential additional costs is presented.

1.2 Provide experiential introductions to courses (on-line and face-to-face) that give students a feel for the course before registration.

1.3 Ensure handbooks are accessible in style and clear in their content.

1.4 Engage students explicitly in dialogue about the rationale for the pedagogy and curriculum of their course, and the link between these and the development of employability and enterprise (e.g. by bringing in recent alumni for discussions).

Ensure there are no unnecessary barriers to student progression

2.1 Improve organisation and timetabling issues to ensure the start of the term is smooth and students can attend orientation and induction events**.**

2.2 Review the number and timing of formative and summative assessment points, to ensure students receive adequate formative feedback.

2.3 Review resubmission and penalty processes to ensure they are reasonable and fair.

2.4 Incorporate formal exit points into all courses so students who leave can take any credit acquired with them, simplifying any future return to higher education.

2.5 Review and where necessary ease students' transfer between courses within the University through provision of information and support.

Develop the curriculum

3.1 Increase the use of "high agency pedagogy" (i.e. that supports students in developing confidence and independence, for example through structured crits across year groups).

3.2 Develop curricula that recognise and value the cultural capital of all students.

Support for Course Teams

Address structural instability of course team leadership

4.1 Ensure course teams contain a suitable balance of full time/fractional and hourly paid staff for student support and for implementing course and University processes.

4.2 Improve administrative systems, particularly those that support: communication to students, provision of feedback, recording of achievement, and academic quality assurance (mainly already under consideration via the SICOM programme).

4.3 Improve communication between tutors of similar disciplines within and between colleges to promote co-operation between same-subject or same-medium groups.

4.4 Explore the feasibility of introducing sabbatical opportunities for course directors.

Course Organisation and Management Issues (some of which are already under consideration via the SICOM change programme)

5.1 Ensure admissions policies are effective for both 'recruiting' and 'selecting' courses.

5.2 In relation to recruiting international students, clarify who has responsibility at each stage and what is the timing of decision-making.

5.3 Improve the quality and tracking of retention data.

5.4 Review College and UAL committee and working group structures to ensure participation is as wide as possible – see 4.1 above.

Areas for further investigation

Conduct a systematic consultation of Deans and Associate Deans to illuminate the circumstances surrounding the situations described in 'Course Narratives'.

Duna Sabri
Shân Wareing
Academic Development and Services
11th March 2010

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Appendix A: The sample of courses and students and details of fieldwork

Courses selected	Retention in 2007/8	Total enrolled Y1 2008/9	Current students interviewed	% interviewed	Total withdrawn 2007/8	Withdrawn interviewees	% interviewed	Meetings with tutors	Observed teaching sessions
01. FdA	63%	104	9	9%	43	8	19%	4	3
02. FdA	54%	27	2	6%	13	4	30%	3	1
03. BA	50%	173	11	6%	5	3	60%	4	0
04. BA	97%	64	10	16%	16	5	31%	3	2
05. BA	71%	23	5	22%	6	3	50%	2	1
06. BA	78%	98	7	7%	21	5	24%	2	2
07. BA	59%	45	6	13%	22	6	27%	3	1
08. BA	95%	43	11	26%	3	2	67%	3	1
09. BA	82%	14	6	43%	3	3	100%	0	0
10. BA	76%	17	4	24%	6	2	33%	2	1
Total	78%	608	71	12%	138	41	29%	20	12

Appendix B: Research instruments

Interview questions for withdrawn students

1. How did you come to do the course?
2. What was it like when you started?
3. How did you come to start thinking about leaving?
4. What support, if any, would have helped you stay on?
5. What were your experiences of assessment?
6. How much did you attend? (Establish when and why attendance declined)
7. What was it like getting to know other students?
8. What did you think of the College environment?
9. What are you doing now?
10. About you:
    Are you the first person in your family to go to university (excluding siblings?
    How old were you when you started the course?
    How do you describe your ethnic identity?
    Were you doing a paid job when you were on the course? If yes, how many hours?

Interview questions for current students

1. Tell me about how you came to do this course.
    a. this subject
    b. this college
2. What, for you, is the purpose of the course?
3. Tell me about what happened when you started the course.
4. Since you started, how have your views changed, if at all about [course subject]?
5. What has been the role of other students?
6. What has been your experience of assessment?
    a. What feedback have you had?
    b. Do you understand it?
    c. Do you feel you know how you are doing?
7. What about feedback from you to the course team?
8. Do you see a relationship between the kinds of things you were introduced to and what you might do in the future?
9. What have been the highlights of doing this course? And the low points?
10. To finish, can I get some details about you?
    Are you the first person in your family to go to University? (excluding siblings)
    How old were you when you started this course?
    How do you describe your ethnicity?
    Are you doing a paid job? How many hours?

Focus Group questions

1. Looking back over the last 2.5 years, what have been the highlights of the course?
2. And what have been the lowpoints?
3. What has been your experience of assessment?
4. How and when do you give feedback to the course team?
5. What for you is the purpose of the course?
6. How would you describe the social side of being on the course?