

Understanding student engagement and transition



Carolyn Mair
London College of
Fashion
University of the Arts
London 20 John Prince's
Street
London
<http://www.cazweb.info/>

Lalage Sanders
Cardiff Metropolitan
University
Llandaff Campus
Cardiff
CF5 2YB
lsanders@cardiffmet.ac.uk
[k
http://www3.cardiffmet.ac.uk/English/health/p/Pages/DrLalageSanders.aspx](http://www3.cardiffmet.ac.uk/English/health/p/Pages/DrLalageSanders.aspx)

Rachael Street
Cardiff Metropolitan
University
Llandaff Campus
Cardiff
CF5 2YB
rstreet@cardiffmet.ac.uk
<http://www3.cardiffmet.ac.uk/English/health/p/Pages/RachelStreet.aspx>

Abstract

Recently completed research into the progress of Foundation Year students has identified factors that are apparently predictive of non-completion of the course. In a recent study we showed that those who subsequently did not complete had reported lower expectations of their own performance and were less engaged than those who did complete. Engagement was assessed by commitment to attendance. If psychometric measures could be used to identify those at risk of withdrawal during the first year of undergraduate study as well as during the foundation year, it would be possible to target support appropriately to reduce attrition and thereby improve retention. This study, across two Higher Education institutions, replicated the methodology with first year undergraduates. Data were collected from new undergraduates during the autumn term of their first year and will be compared with data from the examination boards at both HEIs at the end of the students' first year to ascertain the measures' diagnostic power. Therefore in this paper we are reporting a preliminary analysis of the qualitative data. Group interviews were conducted to identify the influence on withdrawal of aids and barriers to student engagement. Findings from these group interviews are reported, a new model for understanding successful transition is proposed and suggestions for improving retention through engagement identified.

Keywords

retention, undergraduate, withdrawal, identity, investment community

I. Introduction

The number of students leaving UK universities in the first year of study is approximately 8% (HESA 2009-10). Although this proportion remains constant, it represents increasing numbers of students leaving without a qualification given that more students are enrolling in university courses year on year. Key Information Sets and Unistats broadcast the problems of student withdrawal and low rates of satisfaction with adverse consequences for institutions. Attrition also has economic, ethical and legal implications for funders of higher education as those leaving university without a qualification increase pressure on the public purse. It is also detrimental for the individual who is likely to suffer lowered self-esteem as well as a significant financial debt. Thus, in the current context of rising student fees, retention and success are key concerns in the sector.

This is not a new area of study. Cook (2004) argues that students need to be helped to formulate a more realistic view of what will be expected of them at University and that staff need to ensure that opportunities are provided to build closer relationships with all their students. He stresses that “while we should all aspire to produce students who think and learn independently, we can no longer assume that they will arrive already able to do so” (p.5). Cook found that coming from a family with little parental experience of higher education, poor entrance qualifications, intending to live at home and student confidence in choosing the right course were significantly correlated with dropping out. He also found that male students were more likely than females to leave. As a result of identifying these demographic indicators, he argued that both the identification of problems and potential solutions should be applied locally at course level as problems identified institutionally will not necessarily enable support to be directed where it is needed. However, in terms of attainment, findings reported in Newman-Ford, et al. (2009) showed that gender had only minor impact, while place of residence, prior educational attainment and attendance were significant and interrelated. They proposed that these factors could be used to identify and target students at risk of poor academic performance and dropout. Another potentially important factor in dropout has been highlighted by Smith and Wertlieb (2005) who reported that first-year college students’ expectations about ‘what college is like’ do not always align with their actual experiences. This is in line with a large body of literature on cognitive bias including the classic work of Kahneman & Tversky, (1979) which describes the human propensity to overestimate one’s ability in many contexts. Support for this notion has been reported in the context of first year students in Higher Education by Mair (2012) and others as reported in Smith and Wertlieb (2005) who have found that students with unrealistically high academic or social expectations achieved lower grades than students with average or below average expectations. One possible explanation is that overconfident students may not take opportunities to seek clarification or get help when needed. Consequently, when the outcomes differ from their expectations, they can experience cognitive dissonance (James, 2002; Weiss, 1994) with all its associated negativity.

On the positive side, Bean and Eaton (2001) found that as students' confidence in their academic abilities grows so do their positive social relationships. In turn, this makes them more likely to become integrated. Findings from focus groups with students conducted by Thomas (2002) also reported the importance of enhanced student-staff relationships. Explicitly, Thomas found that if students felt staff believed in them and cared about their outcomes they would gain self-confidence and motivation. According to Yorke and Thomas (2003) success in retaining students requires a strong policy commitment to access and retention, backed up by practical action. When resources are limited, the action needs to be targeted at those most in need of additional support in the early days of their studying.

In sum, factors that have been identified as predictors of drop-out include confidence in choice of course (Cook 2004), attendance (Newman, Ford, et al. 2009, Woodfield, et al. 2006), and level of engagement (e.g. Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 2012) and poor prediction accuracy (Smith and Wertlieb, 2005; Mair, 2012). Factors that can help reduce attrition have been shown to include helping students develop a more realistic appraisal of their academic abilities and building successful and productive relationships with peers and staff.

The study reported here is an extension of a recent study of Foundation Year students in which responses to two psychometric measures, Performance Expectation Ladder (PEL) and the Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale (ABC) (Sanders et al. 2012) appeared to predict withdrawal versus successful completion of studies. In the present study, the students were direct entry undergraduates, not foundation year students. Moreover, the samples were recruited from diverse populations: one comprised undergraduates studying Health Sciences at a traditional multidisciplinary university; the other comprised undergraduates studying Fashion at an Arts university.

2. Method

The study described in this paper is part of a larger study into student engagement and withdrawal. This programme of research includes both a quantitative and a qualitative component. The quantitative component evaluated the efficacy of the two psychometric measures described previously as predictors of withdrawal during the first year of university. Results from this are beyond the scope of this paper due to time constraints. The findings we present in this paper are from the qualitative component which explores students' views on the interaction between confidence and engagement.

Following ethical clearance at both HEIs, 6 groups of new students were recruited half way through their first term using a volunteer opportunity sampling approach at two UK universities. In one HEI they were STEM students whilst in the other HEI, students were arts based.

Small group interviews were held at each HEI to discuss participants' views on what aids student engagement and conversely what factors are likely to lead to withdrawal. The agenda for the group discussion comprised: expectations of university and explored the extent to which those expectations had been met; challenges and aspects of the learning experience (lectures, assignments, time management and schedules); support, looking both at existing networks and establishing new ones; advantages and disadvantages of attending university. The agenda included questions about reasons for their initial choice of university, what they hoped to gain from the experience, and a consideration of reasons that some people leave university without completing the course.

3. Results

Using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) students' views were analysed in relation to the four key themes from the Foundation Year Study: investment, community, confidence and identity. Three of these were evident in the transcripts and are discussed below; however for these students, identity did not appear to be an issue. One possible reason for this is that student identity for those on a degree course is more firmly established than for those on a Foundation year.

3.1 Investment

Investment refers to a need to experience receiving value for money, but also relates to a future vision that justifies the effort and time required to complete a degree. Threats to that future vision will undermine the value and integrity of the current endeavour. As in the Foundation study, these two components were reflected here.

It's an expensive course ... it's a lot of money when you calculate it in our own local currency and the cost of living, it's really expensive, so I think that could be a factor, .. But everything else is so nice, why would you drop out. (Group F, student 1)

Some students saw this financial cost as a reason to continue studying.

Yeah you've already paid for the first year so you may as well do it and if you don't like it from there well (.) you have this year to decide, so just do this one year and if you don't like it by the time it gets to second year then don't do second year. (Group B, student 2)

One group suggested that the financial investment may not be worthwhile to everyone, especially if they are not enjoying the course.

It is a very expensive course and unless you are interested in it, it would almost feel a bit "Why am I here, I'm paying the money and I'm not enjoying it at all" (Group E, student 2)

For most the financial investment of university is completely warranted by future gains.

I was going to get a really good job from this, like in terms of being a designer or in the shoe industry. Very high expectations I had and I still have. (Group F, student 2)

Although not all participants were certain what they wanted to do in the future many acknowledged that completing the course would be a benefit in the long term, especially in relation to career prospects. Therefore any sacrifices incurred to complete the course would be justified.

3.2 Community

A sense of community, being able to relate to their peers or to turn to each other for support was key in sustaining many of the participants.

.. if ever you don't understand there is always somebody who is like "Okay I'll explain it to you", We're really good at helping each other (Group A, student 3)

When participants found parts of the course difficult, it seemed that having the ability to identify with others, who were perhaps also struggling, could act as a comforter.

But then you realise everyone is on the same page. We are all very clueless about what's going on. So it's really nice to have each other around I think (Group E, student 2)

This sense of feeling part of a community also seemed important in building confidence. As Gibbs (2010) suggested, becoming part of an 'exciting community of scholars' (p 47) is crucial to integration and consequently engagement.

3.3 Confidence

Confidence was a prevalent theme throughout the transcripts. Many participants compared themselves to other students and were concerned

I was worried that everyone was going to know so much more than I did. (Group E, student 1)

I don't know until I get feedback because it's a completely new thing to me, until I get feedback I don't really know if I'm doing well or not (Group B, student 2)

Confidence underpins the other two themes; students need to feel confident in the investment they are making and in the community in which they find themselves.

4. Conclusions

We propose a theoretical model to understand student engagement in which confidence plays a pivotal role; a confidence that underpins the other themes of investment and community. The corollary of this is that when confidence fails to grow, or if it diminishes in any way, doubt seeps in undermining the foundation on which academic progress and

aspirations are built. This can become the precursor of emotional and, eventually, literal withdrawal.

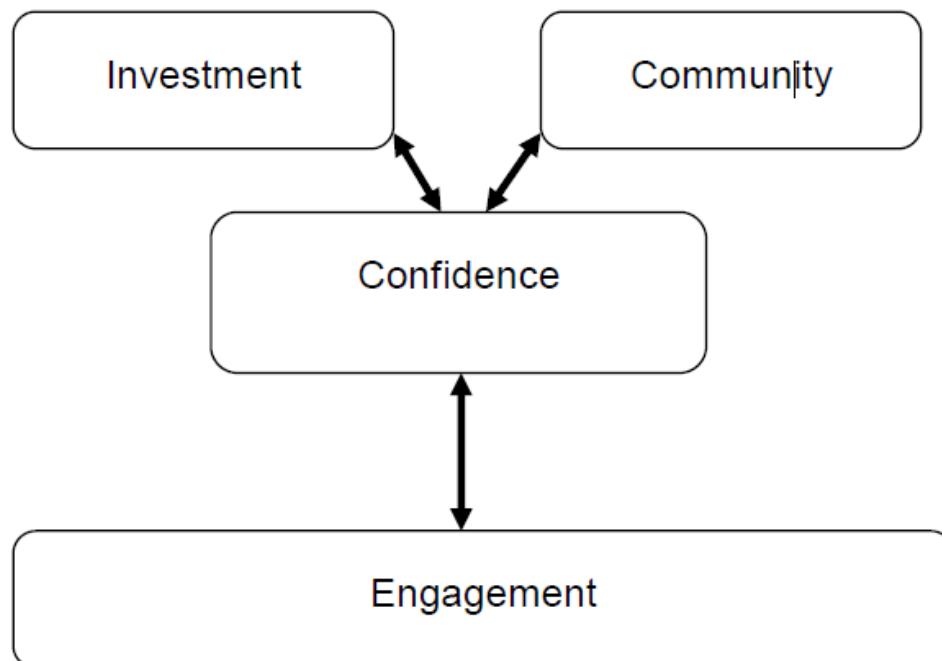


Figure 1. Proposed Interplay between Themes and Engagement

We suggest that confidence is a nebulous construct, one that may prove difficult to measure and quite separate from the construct measured using the Academic Behavioural Confidence scale (Sander and Sanders 2009). Moreover this confidence will vary in fragility between individuals; factors affecting it, other than personality differences, are likely to be exactly those identified by Cook (2004) and Newman-Ford et al (2009) amongst others as predictive of withdrawal. Identification of those background, pre-university, factors that indicate a risk of withdrawal, does not point the way to remediation. Indeed the logical, but unethical, response of the sector would be to identify high-risk groups based on these criteria and minimise their recruitment. Thankfully, the widening participation agenda is leading the sector in the opposite direction.

The interpretative framework that we propose is not only explanatory; it also offers a potential scaffold for intervention. As tutors, we can work to build confidence in our students, confidence that their investment is not wasted, and in their sense of being part of and engaged with a scholarly community. Appraising our current practice in learning and teaching strategies, including assessment, as a means of building confidence in our students may be a salutary experience; however, it may also be the means to facilitate engagement and ease the transition into higher education.

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