Student Retention and Success Symposium 2022: Impact of flexibility in policies and practice on student retention

Session abstracts
9 February 2022

Parallel session 1, 1.1a, Oral presentation (15mins)
Learning from students who left higher education
Dr Elspeth Nelson, The University of Hull

Using data collected from HE students who left their degree programmes before completion, their tutors and support staff, this presentation will explain how resilience can be assessed and fostered in widening participation student populations. The presentation will describe a preventative strategy to ensure that students at risk of leaving their higher education programme are empowered to harness sources of support in their own lives and identify any gaps. The potential of this approach is that it will enable a collaborative and preventive, rather than reactive approach to retention within HE institutions.

Parallel session 1, 1.1b, Oral presentation (15mins)
Retention: Re-engaging the disengaged
Professor Jess Power, Professor Stella Jones-Devitt and Dr Alison Griffith, Staffordshire University

This presentation will provide an evidence-informed approach adopted within a large academic school to re-engage students who had disengaged from formal classes and were at risk of withdrawing. A supportive triage culture was used placing students at the heart of the process; non-engaging students were provided with individual support packages to enable successful re-engagement with academic studies. The work presented provides evidence-based impact showcasing the strength of effective partnerships between the student, the academic team and central guidance. Further analysis revealed between 68-79% of the students identified as at risk of withdrawal had multiple intersections of protected characteristics (three or more).

Parallel session 1, 1.1c, Oral presentation (15mins)
Retaining internship placement students with a safety net under a changing employability landscape
Ron Gibson and Raluca Marinciu, University of Greenwich

We are proposing to present our action research over four cohorts of 200+ MBA International Business internship placement students, examining the evolution of a retention safety net over the changing national environment from pre-Covid, national lockdown, furlough, and now economic recovery. We will provide data on the safety net’s effect on student retention, progression, and ability to garner and maintain internship placements.

Parallel session 1, 1.2a, Oral presentation (15mins)
Supporting new and returning students to be successful during an ongoing pandemic: USW’s Progression Advice Team Experience
Lynda Jones and Helen Pare, University of South Wales

This presentation will showcase examples of how the University of South Wales’s Progression Advice Team have been agile in exploring different approaches to support new and returning students during the pandemic whilst embracing USW’s Digitally Enabled Active Learning (DEAL) principles. The team have designed online transition resources to support students entering university via multiple entry points and through each level of study. The team also led a collaborative review and re-development of a Getting Ready to Learn bite-
Parallel session 1, 1.2b, Oral presentation (15mins)
Setting up a peer mentoring programme online
Carol Edwards, Liz Hardie and Lorraine Gregory, The Open University
Our presentation will share our experiences of setting up and running a pilot online student peer mentoring programme on an introductory Law module with the Law School at the Open University.

Parallel session 1, 1.2c, Oral presentation (15mins)
Embedding wellbeing within the creative curriculum: The need to know project
Professor Hilary Carlisle, Norwich University of the Arts
This presentation will discuss the approach taken at Norwich University of the Arts in response to the disruption in secondary education and rising mental health challenges. ‘Need to Know’ is a seven-week programme, introduced in the first term, which encourages new students to engage with a toolbox of resources to enhance their wellbeing at university.

The programme explicitly links creativity and wellbeing and encourages students to develop a mindful and compassionate mindset which helps them both personally and professionally. The programme comprises a series of asynchronous sessions accompanied by VLE resources, weekly tasks and synchronous group discussion.

Parallel session 2, 2.1, Workshop (40mins)
Building academic and social skills foundations through microcredentials
Dr Luke Millard and Jack Hogan, Abertay University
Credit-bearing, skills-based microcredentials that address the academic and social integration of our students into their first year experience is the focus of this session. Through partnerships with professional services, academics and the Students’ Association, Abertay University has implemented a model that is mandatory for all first years. We will share our approach and the early results and then engage with the participants to have a conversation around how it could be improved and what other elements need to be addressed. The focus of our initiative is to build the foundations for a successful student journey, so a further question would be around how do we move beyond foundations to higher level academic and social skills in this space?

Parallel session 2, 2.2, Workshop (40mins)
Creating a sense of belonging for students by enhancing first year task authenticity
Dr Jennifer Harvey and Dr Ana Schalk, TU Dublin
This workshop will use a University First Year Checklist for Student Success (FYCSS) to explore exchange and map out activities that can develop a learner’s sense of belonging to a student cohort, the University, their subject discipline, and, where relevant, their future profession, by enhancing task authenticity across the first year curriculum.

Parallel session 3, 3.1a, Oral presentation (15mins)
Personal supervision staff training
Paula Gawthorpe, University of Hull
This presentation will explore how the University of Hull effectively reviewed and implemented our Personal Supervision provision for new and returning students starting in September 2021, in order to prepare for and support their learning.

A focused, cross field, working group developed a new staff training module, including access to additional staff wellbeing resources and a simplified A-Z support facility. This work is part of
the ongoing work around developing an inclusive university, and is supported by our newly launched Inclusive Education Framework, all of which will be discussed in more detail.

This presentation will be of interest to colleagues seeking to embed effective and inclusive student support as standard within their programme delivery.

**Parallel session 3, 3.1b, Oral presentation (15mins)**

**Personalised learning for Generation C**  
**Dr Angela Partington, Kingston University**

The pandemic has compelled us to focus, with much more urgency, on the need to provide personalised learning. There is a lot of concern about the ‘gaps’ in students’ knowledge and skills, especially those which the pandemic is likely to have exacerbated, and how these might be filled or compensated for. But if we are genuinely committed to innovation in HE, we need to focus not on these gaps, but on what students bring – their values, aspirations, awareness, and understanding: these should be valued as real strengths which will help us to co-create personalised learning, by recognising students as change-makers.

**Parallel session 3, 3.1c, Oral presentation (15mins)**

**Bridging award gaps: Racial inclusivity for retention and success**  
**Peggy Murphy, Liverpool John Moores University and Dr Paul Campbell, University of Leicester**

This presentation is a brief case study about how practical guided activities promoted racially inclusive practice in Health and Social Care.

**Parallel session 3, 3.2a, Oral presentation (15mins)**

**No student left behind: Enhancing student success and experience through flexible learning**  
**Eirini Tatsi, Sara Raybould and Libby Farrier-Williams, University of West London**

With more than 60% of the student population coming from an underrepresented background, the University of West London is unquestionably an institution focusing on widening participation. The transition to online delivery undoubtedly had a differential impact on our student body. In our session we will provide evidence-informed practices and how flexible learning contributed positively to enhance retention and student experience, and reduce degree awarding gaps.

**Parallel session 3, 3.2b, Oral presentation (15mins)**

**On campus transition events for mature students**  
**Roshana Wickremasinghe, University of Southampton**

Declining and static retention numbers of mature students has been highlighted by the Office for Students, who concluded that mature students have not been sufficiently prioritised. This presentation will explore the University of Southampton’s activity to address these numbers, with a focus on their campus-based transition events for mature students. This was the first year these events were offered, as part of wider work to address recruitment and continuation. Although holding an in-person event now comes with many risks, this was a crucial time to offer an enhanced transition for our mature students, following the previous year of interrupted learning.

**Parallel session 3, 3.2c, Oral presentation (15mins)**

**Veterinary gateway success initiatives**  
**Dr Grace Mackintosh Sim and Dr Lisa Thurston, Royal Veterinary College**

The Royal Veterinary College has the longest established Veterinary Foundation course, running since 2003. In September 2020, we implemented a range of new success initiatives
including: a Science Communication module, Transition tutorials, linking with schools and colleges for individual learning insight, and Summer sessions aimed at welcoming new students and supporting outgoing students. There was a noticeable increase in the number of students successfully progressing to the Veterinary Medicine course. We will discuss the challenges and opportunities involved in devising and implementing these new strategies, and how we are continuing to develop this year.

Parallel session 4, 4.1a, Oral presentation (15mins)
**Supporting transitions and inductions (in the context of Covid)**
Dr Fran Garrad-Cole, Bangor University
The Covid-19 pandemic has affected educational experiences at all levels since March 2020. Experiences have differed across the nations of the UK. 'Non-traditional' and overseas entrants have a further range of experiences. The project presented here aimed to better understand the challenges presented to, and anxieties experienced by, these students and tailored support to ensure a smooth transition to University and to maximise success through Year 1 and beyond. This was achieved using a tripartite approach: understanding and responding to students’ experiences and concerns; supporting the learner journey through a pre-arrival and extended induction; and by ensuring adequate student preparation for assessment by examination.

Parallel session 4, 4.1b, Oral presentation (15mins)
**Pathways preview promotes successful retention of international students in a pandemic**
Dr Victoria Wilson-Crane, Kaplan International Pathways
Learn, in this presentation, how a new virtual pre-arrival learning opportunity was made available to international pathways students at the height of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The resource aimed to provide students with tools and information in advance of programmes beginning, which, in turn, would ensure they could fully participate in their new programmes. The platform has been incrementally updated, ahead of each intake with new materials, based on student feedback. Student retention, as a result, was very high and staff commented that students have never been better prepared for their pathways programmes.

Parallel session 4, 4.1c, Oral presentation (15mins)
**We missed our Freshers’ induction in the pandemic: What can we do?**
Professor Helen Higson and Thomas Harvey-Ball, Aston University
Research shows the importance of student engagement in the first three weeks of their time at university. We found that if a student is highly engaged in the first weeks of university, they will do better in their studies, as measured by year-end assessment, even if their engagement drops off. That is why induction activities are important. The pandemic has left a cohort of second years without a normal first Freshers’ induction. So we included second year students in our normal first year inductions. We have surveyed students in Business and Mathematics on this experience and will present results.

Parallel session 4, 4.2a, Oral presentation (15mins)
**How does having BTECs rather than A-levels relate to retention and success?**
Dr Catherine Dilnot, Oxford Brookes University and Dr Gill Wyness and Professor Lindsey Macmillan, University College London
Increasing numbers of young people are entering HE every year with BTECs or a mixture of BTECs and other qualifications, rather than just A-levels, and this route to HE has been credited with recent successes in widening participation. But these students have lower retention rates and graduate with lower class degrees, on average, than A-level entrants. Is this to do with their qualifications, or is it to do with other characteristics of these entrants? We
use linked administrative data for three recent cohorts to try to account for these gaps.

**Parallel session 4, 4.2b, Oral presentation (15mins)**

**Student engagement + retention**
Dr Mark Passera and Paolo Monachello, Dundee University

The impact of Covid-19 will be profound and long term in HE. This point has been echoed in recent research into Covid-19 and its impact on education by Yong & Watterston (2021) and Crawford (2020) among others. Building on this awareness of how teaching and learning strategies need to reflect disruptive innovations and forced experiments, this presentation highlights new practices linked to student retention and success through the use of innovative and novel technological tools.

The rise of digital resources and the move into multiple hybrid models of delivery, learning and assessing has become not only a forced experiment, but a rapid iterative developing model within higher education.

**Parallel session 4, 4.2c, Oral presentation (15mins)**

**Opening the black box: Strategies for student success in hybrid learning at the University of the West of Scotland**
Professor Jonathan Powles, Gavin Lee, Stephanie Jehan-Spiers and Maeve Cowper, University of the West of Scotland

As the pandemic hit, The University of the West of Scotland rapidly swung into place a number of measures to boost student engagement in the hybrid learning environment, with the hope of reducing expected student attrition as we moved to a new and perhaps uncomfortable mode of learning.

We were assisted by the fact that a shift to hybrid learning was already part of our teaching and learning plan, as it suited the needs of the UWS cohort (typically more mature students, often with work and caring responsibilities and limited resources and opportunity for extensive and immersive on-campus engagement).

We introduced a suite of policy and system approaches to support students learning in a hybrid mode, often with most or all of their learning online. These included:

- An abolition of the existing, somewhat prescriptive attendance policy which was replaced with a much more enabling engagement policy;
- The creation of a proactive Student Success Team which reached out to students who might need contact or support, as identified by a series of centrally-generated learner analytics;
- The creation of a “digital buddies” scheme to provide peer support students new to online learning;
- The introduction of a new VLE, Aula, which is focused on student-student engagement rather than knowledge transmission.

Early analysis suggests these measures not only prevented any increase in attrition, but indeed have increased retention by a factor of 3%, and have been adopted as the basis for a permanent, post-pandemic student success strategy.

**Parallel session 5, 5.1, Workshop (40mins)**

**Bridging the gap: Support intervention through a hybrid team**
Dr Kellie Vincent and Dr Steve Briggs, University of Bedfordshire

How to support students at risk was challenging pre-pandemic. The pandemic intensified these demands and so approval was granted for the UoB Business School to concept test a
multifaceted intervention team.

In our context the diversity of student needs is extensive. While there are established academic and support team roles operating in the sector, they are not always aligned to the point of need. We found that different hybrid roles are needed to better support student success. Yes, we need more flexibility but not just in relation to delivery modes. Institution-wide collaboration appears to rule and different roles are needed.

Parallel session 5, 5.2, Workshop (40mins)
Aspiration and inclusion: The learner journey at Solent University
Alexandra Banks, Louise O'Donoghue and Sarah Longbottom, Solent University
The learner journey has always been a road full of twists and turns, but the events of the last two years have changed this into a game of snakes and ladders for many students in HE. The interventions that Solent University have put into place hope to catch students before they fall too far down those snakes. This workshop will explore our approach of both in-person and online support.