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Developing social integration to enhance student retention and success in higher education: the GROW@BU initiative

B. Gail Thomas

School of Health & Social Care and Centre for Excellence in Learning, Bournemouth University

Email: thomasg@bournemouth.ac.uk

Janet Hanson

Centre for Real-World Learning, University of Winchester

Email: janet.hanson@winchester.ac.uk

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Abstract: Widening participation and ensuring fair access to universities for ‘non-traditional’ students is a major concern of higher education in England. Outcomes are evaluated in terms of increased recruitment of non-traditional students and also increased retention of these students. Retention initiatives have gradually become more nuanced; there has been a shift from models of support **for** students towards ones of engagement **with** students. This has involved a change in focus from instrumental support such as study skills to address deficits in academic performance to more holistic approaches aimed at enhancing student integration within the university community. This paper describes a retention programme that aims to help students integrate socially with other students and staff. By supporting students’ growth of identity and social belonging, it aims to increase engagement with their academic work. Students whose profiles pose greater risk of leaving early, such as mature students and those living at home while studying locally, were investigated in the evaluation and appeared to benefit

Key terms: higher education, retention, social integration, coaching, widening participation.

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Introduction

Widening participation (WP) has been a concern in England for a number of years as governments have sought to increase social mobility by expanding participation in higher education to groups who have not traditionally considered it an option. Under-represented groups in HE include students from lower socio-economic groups and low participation neighborhoods, some ethnic groups, students who have been in care and disabled students (OFFA, 2014). Despite increased access, WP students are still more likely to leave university early (Rose-Adams, 2013) and institutions have responded to the challenges arising from the needs and expectations of non-traditional students in innovative ways. In 2012 regulations were enacted to

ensure that fair access to higher education was safeguarded in the wake of increased tuition fees. Publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) were required to develop access strategies if they wish to charge tuition fees above the basic level of £6,000 for full time undergraduate programmes. These agreements, approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), identified how the HEI intended to safeguard and promote fair access to higher education. For Bournemouth University (BU) this requirement coincided with an internal review into student processes and offered a timely opportunity to re-invigorate its approach to supporting students to succeed and develop. BU introduced a range of initiatives under the overall title of GROW@BU and although initially aimed at supporting WP students, in the longer term the underpinning concepts were designed to benefit all BU's students. Widening participation at BU, in respect of our agreement with OFFA, focusses on students from low participation neighbourhoods, first in family to go to university and lower socioeconomic status (Bournemouth University, 2013).

Reflecting the shift in focus from student 'support' to 'engagement' (Bartram, 2009; Jacklin and Le Riche, 2009), GROW@BU aims to develop students' resilience and independence, thus encouraging learners to reach their full potential. Two core elements of GROW@BU were the introduction of the Student Engagement Team (SET) and the promotion of a more fundamental change in guiding and advising students based on professional coaching behaviours.

This paper provides an account of the operation of GROW@BU in its first year and reflects on an evaluation undertaken during 2012/13. The findings are briefly discussed in the context of research relating to student retention and success and focus specifically on the importance of social integration as a means of developing students' resilience for success in higher education. The concept of social integration had emerged as an important retention factor in earlier research that BU was engaged in through the '*What Works? Student Retention and Success*' programme (Nottingham Trent University, 2011).

Factors affecting retention

Factors affecting the retention and academic success of students from non-traditional backgrounds have received significant attention. Universities that reported early success in retaining undergraduates from lower socio-economic groups were demonstrating a commitment to maximising the success of all their students and, in particular, realising the significance of the first year of study in this process. These universities therefore emphasised the social dimension in learning activities in addition to support for transition into and during the first year of study (Yorke and Thomas, 2003).

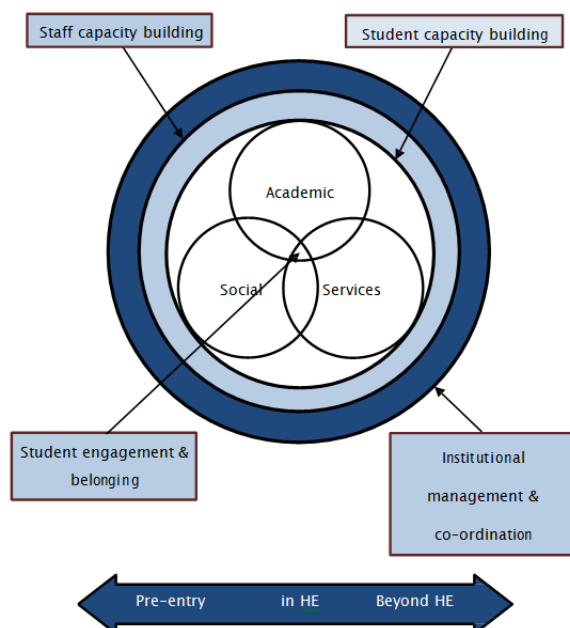
Initiatives designed to enhance student retention within that first year highlight the importance of five key success factors, which include:

- Students' understanding of higher education;
- Students' academic preparedness being sufficient to meet course demands;
- The needs of particular groups of students;
- Students' level of social integration within the HE context;
- The development of a robust learner identity (Gazeley and Aynsley, 2012; Jones, 2008; Thomas, 2012).

Retention initiatives may be categorised according to where they are positioned within the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) conceptual model that was applied to the 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' projects (Figure 1). This model suggests that student engagement and belonging is developed through a combination of academic, social and service provision and can be cultivated on three levels. Initiatives can focus on building student capacity to succeed, on building staff capacity to support success or on strengthening institutional management and co-ordination of initiatives. Within each of these three levels, the initiative might be further focused on one of the three spheres of influence, academic, professional services, or social. GROW@BU is an example of an institutional level initiative with activities designed to have an impact in all three spheres of influence.

However, this paper specifically examines the social sphere and reports on aspects designed to increase students' capacity for success that focus primarily on their social integration into the university.

Figure 1: A conceptual model of student retention and success



Source: The HERE Project Toolkit, Foster et al. (2012, p3)

Developing social integration and sense of belonging

Moving out of their home environment and into university has been viewed traditionally as a rite of passage for many young people. However, the complexity of this process and the emotional resilience needed for the adjustment are often underestimated (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune, 2008; Qualter, Whiteley, Morley and Dudiak, 2009; Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) as it is assumed that students are capable of making this social transition almost seamlessly. However, students' expectations about university and their interpretation of their experiences are shaped by their prior cultural experiences, so those from a non-traditional academic background who lack any prior experience of university may well lack the cultural, social, or linguistic capital necessary for successful integration into this unfamiliar environment (Leese, 2010; Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali and Rogers, 2012; Watson, Nind, Humphris, and Borthwick, 2009). The concept of capital is derived from Bourdieu's work and refers to "to any resource that holds symbolic value within a field and therefore acts as a currency of that field" (Watson et al., 2009:672).

Students from specific demographic groups may also experience different challenges. Mature students, for example, may feel marginalised by socialisation activities if they perceive them to be aimed principally at young people, since they align themselves more to an identity of 'novice academic' rather than 'student' (Chapman 2012) and non-residential students form another group with specific socialisation challenges (Cashmore, Scott and Cane, (n.d); Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011; Holdsworth, 2006).

There are strong links between students' informal social interaction and their learning, since social networks can be a source of social and academic resources to support study (Hommes, Rienties, de Grave, Bos, Schuwirth and Scherpbier, 2012). For these reasons, it is suggested that universities should give more attention to facilitating students' social integration into the university 'habitus' and help them to 'fit in' (Leese, 2010) and also to providing appropriate opportunities to develop social relationships with other students (Maunder, et al., 2012), thus enabling them to move from the margins of belonging to achieve full membership of university life (Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009).

Students who feel more socially integrated are less likely to think about leaving university since friends provide direct emotional support, equivalent to that provided by family relationships, as well as acting as a buffer in stressful situations (Wilcox, et al., 2005). However, mature students and those who are non-residential may not realise the significance of social relationships at university in acting as a support mechanism and may need to be alerted to their importance (Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011). However,

organising support for social integration may be more of a challenge for universities than managing staff support (Leese, 2010).

One of the most interesting retention factors is the identification of the 'doubter' who becomes a 'persister'. These are students who find the transition to HE difficult and think of leaving, but actually stay; these are far more numerous than those who actually leave. Approachable and available staff can make a big difference to these struggling students, but a more significant factor supporting students' persistence is friendship. Although the primary reason for students 'doubting' are academic issues, the most important influence on them staying is support from friends and family (Nottingham Trent University, 2011; Xuereb 2014).

Having noted the importance of social integration BU decided to focus on the development of social networks as a key mechanism for helping WP students integrate and stay the course, despite doubts about the capacity of university management to intervene in the social sphere (Palmer et al., 2009), which is why GROW@BU presents a significant case study.

The Student Engagement Team

The Student Engagement Team (SET) was introduced at BU in the autumn of 2012 to promote initiatives that encouraged the development of social relationships that underpin student-to-student friendship and develop effective staff- student communication. The members of SET included six individuals, four females and two males. In addition to being recent BU graduates, one from each academic school, other selection criteria included an interest in learning, teaching and coaching, having held a student leadership role and experience of facilitating groups and organising events. The positioning of their role was a deliberate attempt to ensure that were both familiar with the university environment having experienced it as students, but were also full members of university staff, which afforded them access to privileged information about university systems. Their training included a comprehensive introduction to the Student Support Services teams, Students' Union officers and staff within academic schools. A major element of their training covered coaching behaviours, tools and techniques.

They offered a support service for all first year undergraduates, but with a proactive focus on those from WP backgrounds. The total number of new WP students arriving at BU that year was 728 and they were all contacted by their SET member by email prior to arriving. Aiming to be seen as friendly faces with time to talk, the SET promoted engagement through social events, such as movie nights, bowling events, a quiz night and visits to local attractions. Each worked primarily within one academic school but the team members cover for each other and students can approach any member of the team if necessary. An important element of their interaction with students is to use coaching behaviours to underpin positive conversations and, although equipped with the knowledge of support

services, they empower students to find their own solutions to challenges. They use the GROW coaching model (Whitmore, 2009) to guide their conversations, helping students to develop their problem-solving skills and establish their own goals to promote self-reliance. The GROW model involves the coach talking with the individual using structured prompts designed to promote discussion about their challenges by clarifying their **G**oal (where do you want to get to?), checking **R**eality (what is the current situation?) , reviewing **O**ptions (what could you do?) and finally, agreeing their action (**W**hat will you do?). The overall number of individual interactions between SET members and WP students in first year of operation was over 100, involving around 14% of the target audience.

The evaluation study

The SET's first year of operation (2012-2013) was a learning year, exploring how best to interact with students, which events and activities to offer and aspects of the role that students valued most, so it was important to evaluate the initiative in order to learn how best to embed it in the longer term. The SET members maintained detailed records of the students with whom they interacted and this information was supported by statistics on retention and progression from BU's central student record system. In order to gain feedback about the SET from students with specific WP profiles, we also undertook semi-structured interviews with a small sample of four first years who responded to an invitation to contribute to the evaluation. The external evaluator met with each student in May towards the end of the academic year to discuss their experiences of university life and perceptions of the SET. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Ethics approval was given by the University Ethics Committee and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, with pseudonyms substituted for their real names.

The four student interviewees included two males, Harry (aged 18) and Michael (aged 43) and two females, Abby (aged 20) and Sophie (aged 18). Harry was a non-residential student and living at home with his parents close to the university. Michael was living alone in rented accommodation in the town and the two female students were living in university halls of residence.

Adjusting to university life and developing compatible friendships

They were all first generation university students. The three younger students found every aspect of their first weeks 'all a bit of a learning curve' (Harry) and being away from home was 'quite a shock' (Sophie). For these three, making friends and engaging socially with other students was part of 'university life' that they had been expecting (Holdsworth, 2006) and something they deliberately made an effort to do in their first few weeks of

term, albeit with varying degrees of success. Contrary to earlier findings that stressed the importance of living arrangements in developing friendships (Wilcox, et al., 2005), neither Sophie nor Abby found it easy to maintain long-term friendships with those with whom they were living in University residences:

We have seven of us in our flat, we all do different courses and we all have totally different backgrounds, but we just don't really gel very much... They're quiet and they just kind of stick to themselves.
(Sophie)

Harry also recognised the importance of 'playing the game' to fit in at university and made an extra effort to meet people since he was not living in halls. He realised that by living at home he did not conform to the stereotypical image of a university student and therefore might be positioned as different by other students:

I was really determined to be as outgoing as possible. And I think actually coming here has made me more outgoing than if I did live at another university, because it has forced me to go out. (Harry)

He made friends with students on his course but he developed his most significant relationships with other local, non-residential students, whom he met by chance:

There are quite a few of us and I've only met them through chance but I expected I was the only one. But there's actually quite a few but I never knew that, you see. (Harry)

Local students living at home can find it difficult to balance the tensions between maintaining their old life and their desire to fit into their new student life, which can have a negative impact on their engagement with university (Holdsworth, 2006). Harry, however, seemed to be successfully adjusting to university life by developing friendships with others in a similar position who made him appear less strange and 'other' than he had expected.

Michael, however, as a mature student, did not expect to be engaging socially with other students. In common with others like him, his primary focus right from the start was his academic work (Chapman, 2012/13), and he valued relationships with those who could help him with this:

If it wasn't [for the] support of these other lads I just felt like I wasn't ready to produce any work. I just didn't have the ability... my experience of university wasn't social. The only social interaction I have was people next to me at the desks. (Michael)

So we found that although most students recognise the value of making friends when they arrive at university and 'play the game' according to stereotyped expectations about becoming a student (Holdsworth, 2006), their approach to building social relationships may initially be based on

convenience, either social or academic, and may therefore be weak in times of crisis.

The role of the SET in supporting socialisation

The primary role of the SET initially was to offer students opportunities to meet new people and build their social networks. Overall however, the social activities they organised attracted limited attendance and had mixed success. In most cases, the events took place too late in the autumn term, by which time some students had already formed friendships, so they did not act as the trigger to building relationships as originally anticipated

The SET members also met students individually. Their familiarity with university processes enabled them to underpin their coaching approach with appropriate signposting to relevant individuals for the students in times of stress. This aspect of the SET role proved invaluable for all four students.

Abby, Sophie and Michael experienced serious doubts about staying at university during their second term but they lacked confidence to approach staff for guidance about transitioning through this period to remain at university. None of them had formed sufficiently strong social relationships through informal networks and would not have successfully negotiated access to the right source of guidance without the help of their SET member.

Abby found it difficult to choose which specific course pathway to follow in her second year and she could not find anyone who could provide the right level of interaction and guidance to help make her decision, until she spoke to her SET member:

At the end of our first year, we get to choose our course for the next year and I was so confused about what to do. And [SET member] was there just helping and she was really good...I probably would've dropped out, to be honest, if it wasn't for her. (Abby)

Sophie experienced doubts about her academic ability on returning to BU after Christmas, so her SET member helped her organise a meeting with the relevant academic tutor to discuss her doubts, following which she decided to stay. She admitted that she would not have known how to approach her lecturers without the help of her SET member:

At the start I was a bit wary of contacting them [lecturers]. But then when [SET member] set up the meetings, it kind of made that a little easier every week, just kept me going, just to motivate me to keep working and finish. (Sophie)

Michael's expectations about university had been gained from a friend who had studied a long time ago and this had led him to form the impression that university study would be easy, but on finding that it was not, he was beginning to doubt his capacity to succeed:

I found my degree really hard core. It was like a lot of work but I think a lot of that was to do with the fact that I was just slow.
(Michael)

His SET member recognised that he might benefit from meeting with the Learning Support team and, when found to be dyslexic, he gained specialist guidance about learning strategies.

Supporting a sense of belonging that turned 'doubters' into 'persisters'

For students coming to university without cultural capital accrued through prior experience, adjusting to the new 'institutional habitus' is challenging (Leese, 2010). Social networks can support this adjustment but the university friendships for these students seemed fragile at point of crisis. So at such times, when friends might normally be relied on for support, there was an absence that was filled by the SET member that turned a time of doubting into resilience to persist at a transitional point in their experience (Palmer et al., 2009).

The value of the SET being informed members of staff was recognised and it was primarily their position of being both within the school and slightly outside it, with a status that was midway between student and staff, which appeared to be most helpful. Despite finding staff approachable, the students' unfamiliarity with university procedures caused them to experience insecurity and lack of confidence in times of crisis that inhibited their access to staff (Christie et al., 2008), but the SET members acted as a bridge between informal social networks and formal university structures to foster closer relationships between the students and staff (Morosanu, Handley, and O'Donovan, 2010).

This combination of role, status and the use of coaching conversations to promote resilience enabled the SET members to provide appropriate support and guidance that helped each student over the threshold during their transitional turning point (Palmer et al., 2009).

To be able to talk to someone for the first time about it [a problem at home] has really eased me So yeah, it's been a massive impact in my life. (Sophie)

The students recognised in the SET the value of its members being 'near peers' or 'insiders' (Maunder et al 2012). Being graduates of BU and from the same school as the students bestowed validity on the advice they provided:

I think it certainly helps, yeah. You're speaking to someone who's been there, done that kind of thing. (Harry)

Despite the challenges they had faced, each student appeared optimistic about their future at university. Their interaction with the SET had

facilitated a greater resilience to persist and supported their transition between home and university by increasing their sense of belonging.

Learning from the evaluation

The evaluation highlighted a number of ways in which the SET initiative might be strengthened. Although being slightly surprised by the initial email contact from the SET, our four students realised that the SET member was offering support aimed at those students who might be at risk of dropping out of university and they all thought that this was a positive initiative. Despite our concern that WP students might resent being overtly targeted, it did not appear to be the case, so we are continuing this approach.

However, as the SET were employed quite close to the start of the academic year there was a delay in putting on some social activities, therefore relationships were not established early with some students; we will ensure activities are planned from Freshers' Week onwards and continue to evaluate each activity to determine its success in reaching relevant students.

The students identified that some groups have different needs, therefore we plan to diversify the range of activities for specific demographic groups, for example, bringing together non-residential students and ensuring there is a focus on academic societies to attract mature students to events.

As a result of evaluating the impact of the SET, BU has committed to extending it into the future. Although WP will remain its key focus, the aim is to extend the opportunity to all first year students more explicitly and to monitor the effect this has on uptake, learning from the response to activities, presence and relationships that were experienced in the first year of operation. Further tracking of students supported by the SET will be undertaken to monitor their progress.

Conclusion

Widening participation presents opportunities and challenges for all universities and innovative ways of engaging with students from this group are worthy of sharing. Building on earlier research which suggested that students' social integration is a key factor in transition and retention in higher education, we have shown how an intervention designed to foster social integration can be successful in developing students' resilience and in supporting retention. Although small scale, our evaluation supports research about the importance of social integration generally and also highlights how it plays out for specific groups of students. Mature and local non-residential students are two groups who may need to be reminded of the value of social interactions in getting the most from their university experience. Nor should we assume that students living in university residences are automatically going to develop sustainable friendship groups with those they live closest to, and may need accessible 'friendly faces' especially in times of crisis.

Finally, despite suggestions that university management might be challenged to intervene in the liminal space between the social and academic spheres of influence, our students' reactions to the SET suggest that staff with their combination of experience, purpose and position, ie: near peer, insider yet staff, and at the boundary between formal and informal structures, can provide an important additional source of support for some students and may support their transition from 'doubter' to 'persister'.

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