

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change

University of Staffordshire
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What Works? Student Retention & Success is a Paul Hamlyn Foundation initiative working with the Higher Education Academy, Action on Access and 13 UK universities. The second phase (What Works?2) builds on the first phase of the initiative (What Works?1). What Works?1 culminated in the report: Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change (Thomas 2012).

1. Description of the institution and its disciplines to provide contextual overview

Staffordshire University is a post-92 institution, with main campuses in Stoke on Trent and Stafford, and a further satellite campus in Shrewsbury for the provision of nursing and midwifery. In 2014-15 it had a total of 17,735 students of whom 9970 were enrolled on first degrees (from HESA data). This was a drop in total numbers of students of 12% from the previous year.

The university is organised into four faculties – Arts and Creative Technologies, Business Education and Law, Computing Engineering and Sciences, and Health Sciences. For the purposes of this project, subjects from three of the four faculties were engaged.

Improving student retention has been a key activity at the University over a number of years, and we recognise that our student demographics have an impact on retention rates – our average entry tariff is low compared with others in the sector; we recruit a large number of students with BTEC qualifications; we recruit a large number of local students, and finally we are becoming more aware of an increasing number of students who commute to the university from other parts of the West Midlands, and for whom a sense of belonging is hard to create.

As well as the detailed internal data that we review on retention, when we look at comparator organisations and use HESA non-continuation data, we can see that in 2014-15, 12.2% of students failed to continue from the previous year, an increase from 11.0% in the previous dataset. This reinforces the need to continue to develop our policies and practices regarding student retention.

As well as improving retention, we work hard on improving student attainment, recognising that being retained is one thing, but being successful is as, if not more, important. We have been running a parallel programme, the “Raising Attainment Roadmap” which looks in detail at personal tutoring, observations of teaching, module evaluations and module mark distributions, to ensure that our students have the best chances of gaining a good degree.

Members of the core team.

Michael G Hamlyn - Director Academic Enhancement
Noel Morrison - Academic Registrar and Director of Student Experience
John Franklin - Director of Student Administrative Services
Steve Wyn Williams - Dean of Academic Development and Policy
Students' Union President

Participating disciplines, programmes, members of the discipline teams, What works? theme(s) addressed.

Engineering – focusing on personal tutoring

Peter Barnes
Cedric Belloc

Business Management – focusing on use of graduate attributes

Stephen Kelly
Linda Phillips

Music Technology – focusing on peer mentoring

David Newman
Ben Ramsay

Significant internal changes or context to be taken into account when reading this report

While running this project, there have been a number of changes to the academic staff involved in the discipline teams, although we have managed to maintain a degree of continuity by ensuring that Academic Group Leaders from each subject area were involved.

The biggest change to occur during the project was the migration to a new student records and information system, which in the short term has meant a reduced capability for ad hoc reporting, which will be addressed in future. This however has limited some of the work that we wanted to carry out on reporting of retention data on a monthly basis at individual course level. In addition, the change to the new information system has meant that Staffordshire University have not been able to provide the data on attainment across student groups and the years of the project. A significant amount of time was spent investigating how the data could be extracted from the two systems and presented in the right format. Unfortunately, this reporting could not take precedence over other more significant internal data requirements as well as the mandatory reporting to HESA and others.

External national context

Staffordshire University are aware of the external data available on non-continuation rates from HESA, noting that in the most recent set of data that nationally there was an increase in non-continuation rates, and for SU this trend was also seen.

We are also mindful of the implications of the recent Green Paper, with a focus on ensuring success of wider groups of students but know the difficulties that this can present in terms of attainment and retention when teaching a more diverse group of students.

2. Impact data

Brief details of how the programme was evaluated and presentation of institutional results.

As indicated in the section on significant internal changes, we have not been able to provide the data on attainment from our student information system.

Within Staffordshire University, the programme has been evaluated through the project team meetings, and regular reports to the University Retention and Attainment Sub-Committee, which reports to Learning Teaching and Assessment Committee and through there to Academic Board.

We have reviewed the outcomes of the surveys of belongingness, and these have been shared with the individual course teams and more widely through the university committee system. From this we see:

- An improvement in belongingness in all three subjects from 2014 to 2015
- An improvement on engagement in all three subjects from 2014 to 2015
- An improvement on self confidence in all three subjects from 2014 to 2015
- Our students rate themselves more highly on engagement and self-confidence than the overall population in all universities involved in the study.

The final report and case studies will be presented to the Retention and Attainment Sub Committee in May of this year.

3. Planning for and implementing change

Details about how the teams were selected, interventions selected, how the teams worked together, support etc

The three subject areas that were selected had lower than average retention rates before commencement of the project, and represented three of the University's four faculties in order to support the sharing of good practice across the university. The decision to focus on these three areas was driven by university executive.

The three interventions selected were areas that the university was already committed to developing, but by focussing on specific subject areas allowed more work to be done in refining the activities to specifically support retention and attainment activity. The specific interventions were assigned to the chosen subject areas based on awareness of areas that were of particular concern – personal tutoring was known to be less effective in engineering than in other areas; graduate attributes and use of social media tools were less well developed in Business Management, and for Music Technology, with a need to provide extensive support to students to use software and studio equipment, peer mentoring was seen as a further opportunity to strengthen this support.

For Engineering, the intervention was around extending personal student tutorial activities. In Business Management, we looked at how the Staffordshire Graduate Attributes (our graduate attributes programme) could be used to encourage a sense of belonging. In Music Technology we considered the role of peer mentoring across different levels of the course.

For each of the project teams in faculty, we ensured that an Academic Group Leader was part of the term, to provide leadership at subject level. In addition, at least one other member of staff in each subject area became a part of the institutional project team.

The institutional project team met at least once every two months throughout the project. This was to provide support from the centre to the subject teams, and to allow colleagues from different faculties to come together to share experiences and ideas. These meetings were seen as valuable by the course teams, as it provided the opportunity to share ideas between subject areas and faculties, particularly sharing local initiatives and ways of working that were not otherwise apparent.

These regular meetings were also the opportunity to look at the internal retention data provided through annual monitoring, and the results of the belongingness surveys.

Case studies of particularly effective working

We have provided case studies on:

Music Technology:

Identifying problems with the peer observation system, examples of students who worked with it, powerful case studies of individual students who benefited from peer mentoring and to show how we will move from an opt-in system to an opt-out system

Engineering:

Personal tutoring and the process based approach that was used, together with the new interventions identified for level 3 learners in foundation years which is a more pastoral approach, and reflections on the importance of the course leader role for these more vulnerable students

Business Management

How personal development embedded into core modules has an impact, with reference to improvements in the self-confidence ratings and results of other internal student surveys.

4. Evaluation strategy

Details of institutional evaluation approach/strategy

The individual discipline projects and progress were evaluated through the regular project group meetings.

At institutional level, the project reported initially to the university's Student Experience Committee, then more recently (after a committee restructure) to the Retention and Attainment Subcommittee, which in turn reported to Learning Teaching and Assessment Committee and from there to Academic Board.

Through the committee structure, the institution was able to review progress on the individual projects, but more importantly to gain the benefit of exposure to the principles behind "What Works?". This in turn has helped to inform the strategies being adopted across the institution for the next academic year to support retention.

5. Changes implemented at the institutional level

Members of the project team were also members of the university Retention and Attainment Sub-Committee so were able to influence institutional changes in our approach to student retention and attainment.

The key changes have been: development of a new personal tutoring scheme and provision of funding to support belongingness activities. In addition we provide comments on data provided to course teams, the delivery of sessions at the annual Learning and Teaching Conference and the engagement with Students' Union officers.

Development of a new personal tutoring policy - This has been piloted by course in each faculty of the institution in 2014-15 and has been mainstreamed in 2015-16. The effectiveness of this revised personal tutoring policy will be reviewed at the end of this academic year. To support the implementation of the new policy, training was provided to all course teams where requested. In addition, to support individual colleagues and course teams, information was provided which contained:

- the Personal Tutoring Policy
- Staff Guidelines on Personal Tutoring
- Personal Tutoring Guidelines – Student Flyer
- Personal Tutoring Guidelines for studnets

The staff guideline document sets out clear expectations of:

- Information for Personal Tutors and some guidance on where to find support for students,
- Guidance on learning conversations- how to structure your tutorial and key questions to ask at each level
- Advice: Some case examples
- Rating your performance, how do you perform as a personal Tutor? A self-evaluation checklist

Provision of funding to support belongingness activities - In recognition of the importance of student belonging as a key driver of student retention, central funding for student belonging activities was successfully bid for, for delivery in 2015-16.

It was felt that educational visits organised to support the curricula and to enrich the student experience would help to establish an early and strong bonding of student cohorts and support the development of constructive working relationships, both between students and also between students and staff. This was to provide extra funding for all course teams to allow them to run extra events or visits, which are centred in the curriculum, to generate a sense of belonging for all full time level 3 and level 4 students. The total fund provided for this in 2015-16 was in the region of £140k. Funding was then distributed across all faculties, pro rata with the number of level 3 and 4 students. Through 2015-16, all full time on campus course teams were able to use these additional resource to provide extra external lectures, events and trips (with one group visiting New York). The University Retention and Attainment Sub-Committee is now evaluating the effectiveness of these, but informal feedback from students and staff does indicate that these events have provided greater opportunities for developing that sense of belonging.

In the first years of the project, we were keen to provide standard reports on retention, by course and mode of study to all course leaders on a monthly basis. From previous experience, we know that this ensures that retention becomes a key measure that all staff are engaging with. However, with a change to our student information system, it has become less easy, in the short term, to provide such reports. However, members of the project team have also been involved in early discussion around new business intelligence tools, and we anticipate that in future years, there will be new reporting tools which will make it easier to communicate data in a consistent and systematic manner, which will provide details numbers leaving, reasons and financial impact on university.

In summer 2014, the university's annual Learning and Teaching Conference had the theme of raising attainment. The course teams involved in the project delivered a number of workshops to colleagues from across the University to demonstrate how their interventions were being developed to support retention and attainment in their subject areas.

The subject area that has seen the most impact in terms of curriculum development is Business Management. In this course, the idea of the Staffordshire University Graduate Attributes has been embedded into core modules at each level of the course. This will be reported in the specific case study, which will also show how social media has been used to enhance the feeling of belongingness amongst students.

Throughout the project we have been keen to involve students, and so every year we have had elected officers of the Students' Union as part of the project team. They have attended workshops arranged as part of the project, and been able to contribute to the discussions on the interventions in each subject area.

Impact

- Evidence of impact or significance of institutional level changes

The key evidence of institutional change is in the new activities that are being rolled out across the institution in academic years 2015-16 and 2016-17, all of which have been partially influenced by the What Works? project.

Firstly, the University has a revised personal tutoring policy which has been piloted in 2014-15 and will be used across all courses in 2015-16. To embed the new personal tutoring policy, staff development has been provided across all four faculties of the university. Clear guidance is given on what topics would be covered in personal tutor meetings, and the concept of "learning conversations" has been introduced through the staff development activity.

Secondly, for 2015-16, funding has been made available to faculties which will be used to specifically to provide activities, events or visits for students, that are not social but are to provide opportunities for students to engage in activities that are part of the academic sphere.

For 2016-17, the university will also develop a peer mentoring policy that can be rolled out across all courses.

We are also investing in better attendance monitoring systems, to provide the base information needed to ensure that students are engaging with study, and so that personal tutors can intervene and provide guidance as necessary. Through the summer of 2016 we will be installing hardware and software to enable us to use a commercial attendance monitoring system, which ultimately will provide data that can be used in conjunction with measurement of other student engagements (such as VLE and library usage) to provide better datasets available to personal tutors and to students.

Furthermore, as part of our plans to revise the university operating model, which underpins our new strategic plan, institutionally we have identified that student retention needs to remain a key focus of our activities – business plans are being developed to support activities that will help support improved student retention in a number of ways – in the first instance by starting to use our data more effectively to identify those students who may be at risk.

The final institutional impact is the revised Learning and Teaching Strategy, where we have an increased focus on our Graduate Attributes and a recognition that developing social and cultural capital will be key to future success in retention and attainment.

6. Changes implemented at the discipline level and impact

Three subject areas were involved in this project, from three of the four faculties and each looked at a different form of intervention. The full detail of the activities and impact is described in each of the case studies:

Music Technology (focus on peer mentoring)

This case study considers the design and implementation of a peer mentoring system within the Music Technology provision at Staffordshire University. It covers discipline specific issues as well as a discussion of the challenges and lessons learned during the project. The case study highlights the relationship between engagement with the system and retention rates within the award area.

The system was designed for first year students (level 4 mentees) and utilised second and final year students (level 5, 6 mentors) offering pastoral, social and academic tutoring.

Key lessons have been learnt from this pilot scheme to introduce peer mentoring, that the University can use more widely – in particular the benefit of recognising the work of those who act as mentors – as we develop the University scheme further this will be addressed by encouraging mentors to record their activity formally either through the Higher Education Achievement Record or by engagement with a module on volunteering. In either case, those students would be demonstrating a development of their employability skills.

Engineering (focus on personal tutoring)

This case study was a reinterpretation of the terms and role of the Personal Tutor. A structured programme for individual and grouped personal tutees was introduced across all levels of courses in the School for 2013-14. Despite the broader successes of the personal tutoring initiative, retention in the foundation year remained a problem in 13-14 with a significant number of pastoral issues and difficulties in providing and coordinating the right level of service for the group.

The increase in depth of intervention for 14-15 was to introduce a specific role for the course leader with a specific mandate to encourage belonging, forge the cohort/award identity and to be especially proactive in communication on imminent issues such as deadlines, surveys, employability events. An added consideration was the subject-neutrality of the course leader, with no vested interest in "steering" students towards a specific Level 4 award, and facilitating an objective and considered choice. In addition, a smaller group of personal tutors was selected to work closely with the group and to coordinate and triangulate with the course leader.

The impact of this approach to support and personal tutoring with a group on foundation year engineering students is explained in the case study. More broadly for the university, is the lessons that can be learned on how to support level 3 learners in a variety of disciplines. The need to develop an understanding of subject specific semiotics is highlighted, and if we choose strategically to have a greater focus on foundation year programmes across the institution, then feedback from such studies will be crucial in determining how we might deliver and support those further foundation year or pathway programmes.

Business Management (focus on graduate attributes)

This case study looks at how the Staffordshire Graduate attributes (Professional, Global Citizen, Teamwork, Life-long learner, Reflective & Critical and Discipline Expert) were embedded into modules on the Business Management course and the effect they have had in helping Staffordshire University Business School achieve the aims of the What works? Student retention and success change programme in increasing student retention, belonging, and satisfaction and employability figures.

Impact and changes to modules within the Business School are described – considering these changes more widely provides lessons for other parts of the university. While students have recognised the benefits of employability related modules, we will need to be aware of avoiding unnecessary levels of complexity in developing personal development plans. Again, we are likely to review our Graduate Attributes in the coming year, based on a new University strategy and new employability strategy, and all inputs on how to support employability development will be crucial.

7. Sustainability

The work of What Works? project has informed university wide developments on supporting retention and attainment, as highlighted earlier, and interventions being rolled out across the institution in 2015-16 and beyond will have been influenced by the project.

In 2015-16 the university's new personal tutoring system (developed in part by one of the discipline teams from What Works?) will be implemented across all courses and will be reviewed at the end of the academic year.

Also in 2015-16 activities were arranged and delivered for all new level 3 and 4 students which were designed to foster a sense of belonging in the academic sphere – these were supported with additional funds from the centre. Activities included subject related visits, guest speakers and residential courses. The effectiveness of these will be reviewed at the end of the academic year and the ideas rolled into subsequent years. Funding will continue to be available to support this initiative.

In 2016-17 we will develop institution wide peer mentoring opportunities so that all subject areas can benefit.

As part of redeveloping and embedding our Learning and Teaching Strategy for 2015-16 and beyond, we will include retention and attainment, and the concepts of belongingness as a key strand to our future approach.

As we develop a revised university strategy, supported by a new business operating model, we have already recognised the importance of improving student retention, and so business cases are now being developed for further support for this area of work.

8. Conclusions

Summary of successes and challenges

Individual discipline areas have seen successes, evidenced part by retention data and also by improving scores in the belongingness survey. The biggest change in all areas though, is the way in which those staff close to the project have taken on board the key messages of belongingness, and recognised how to implement this within their subject areas.

The other key success will be the way in which teams from different faculty areas have been able to work together and share ideas as part of this project – building internal networks that did not previously exist.

One of the key challenges has been to gain wider engagement within each of the discipline teams, beyond the enthusiasts who joined the project team –this is however mitigated by the institution wide changes that will happen (influenced by the project) which will put some of the ideas and interventions at the centre of our future practice.

Drawing together impact and learning, and reflection on the process

A key part of the learning of this project was not to underestimate the impact of changing a student information system, and how this could (in the short term) change our ability to mine and manipulate data.

The impact of the project for Staffordshire University is in the developments for the future – work from this project has, through reporting and representation through our committee structure, led to changes institutionally on: personal tutoring policy; funding for events to foster a sense of belonging; financial support for further faculty based retention initiatives; investment in a new attendance monitoring systems; a review of graduate attributes and an intention to deploy peer mentoring more widely in future.

Final Conclusions

The project has provided an opportunity for staff from different disciplines, representing three out of our four faculties to explore in detail interventions that could improve retention and attainment.

At a time when, for this university, performing better in these two factors is a key part of our revised strategy, then within the three disciplines individual academic staff have been at the forefront of new ideas and been in a position to share with each other, and with others in the sector.

Coming out of this project, and linking it to other institutional work, then the following final recommendations emerge:

- Investment and development of attendance monitoring systems
- Improved reporting and data mining through a full Business Intelligence solution
- A fully embedded new personal tutoring policy across institution in 2015-16, to be reviewed at the end of the academic year
- Redevelopment of graduate attributes through 2015-16 to reflect our student demographics as well as requirements of potential employers
- Embedding of the new Learning and Teaching Strategy, which has been informed by What Works?
- Development of further peer mentoring opportunities in 2016-17

Appendix

1. Case Study: Developing confident HE learners through embedding Graduate Attributes into modules on the Staffordshire University Business Management course

Author

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Rationale for the case study

Recognising that the: "...expectations of higher education (HE) have grown to cover complex skills...which enhances the stock of human capital and makes for national economic well-being" (Knight and Yorke, 2002: 3), many HE Institutions are now expected to actively: "promote graduate employability" (Knight and Yorke, 2002: 3). This allows students to prepare students for their future careers, and reflects the views that a degree isn't just about securing an academic qualification, but also about gaining the life and work skills employers respect to help students stand out in the job market. Although the exact form of how to embed employability into the curriculum varies (see e.g. Arrowsmith et al., 2011 for an example in the Geography field), in order to meet this challenge, Staffordshire University developed a set of six Graduate Attributes (Professional, Global Citizen, Teamwork, Life-long learner, Reflective & Critical and Discipline Expert).

In order to achieve these aims, the Business School of Staffordshire University took the approach of embedded these attributes into two specifically designed Employability-focused modules on the Business Management course. Although, the Staffordshire Graduate Attributes are embedded in the course, the rationale for selecting these specific two modules was that the assessments required the students to link their Personal Development Plans (PDS) to specific Graduate Attributes. Although there were a number of other activities associated with the deployment of the Graduate Attributes and indeed a project and project team set up to facilitate this, these modules provided a central focus. These modules will help Staffordshire University Business School achieve the aims of the What works? Student retention and success change programme in increasing student retention, belonging, satisfaction and employability figures. The activities fit within the Active Learning set of discipline changes, as it incorporates learning in which: "...students are actively or experientially involved in the learning process" (Weltman, 2007: 8).

In addition, this work builds on the findings of Phase 1 of the HEA What works? Student retention and success change programme; that students need to feel a greater sense of belonging through developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners, which is relevant to students' interests and future goals.

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

This case study looks at how the Staffordshire Graduate attributes (Professional, Global Citizen, Teamwork, Life-long learner, Reflective & Critical and Discipline Expert) were embedded into modules on the Business Management course and the effect they have had in helping Staffordshire University Business School achieve the aims of the What works? Student retention and success change programme in increasing student retention, belonging, satisfaction and employability figures.

In more detail, the Staffordshire University Graduate Attributes and what these mean for the University are shown in the table below:

Graduate Attribute	What the University will do	Examples include
Professional	We'll encourage you to be professional in everything you do. We'll help you to become a good time manager and encourage you to meet deadlines. Most important of all, we'll show you how to develop that can-do approach that employers look for. You'll also know what it means to be enterprising and entrepreneurial in order to make the most of life's opportunities – and how to deal with its challenges in a calm and considered manner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being reliable, willing and honest • Paying attention to detail • Having integrity • Being self-motivated and competent • Showing respect and being polite • Maintaining a positive attitude • Having good leadership skills • Listening to others
Global Citizen	<p>With today's global economy, it's not surprising that many university graduates forge successful careers overseas. Depending on the degree you take, we'll aim to equip you not only with the skills to succeed in the UK, but also in the increasingly competitive global marketplace.</p> <p>Regardless of your degree we'll ensure you'll be ready to embrace the opportunities that the world has to offer. You'll respect diversity, different cultures and different ways of working – and have an understanding of the global issues that affect us all.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding global issues from different perspectives • Recognising the opportunities that the wider world offers • Learning from and respecting different cultures • Accepting different ways of working • Valuing diversity and the importance of sustainability

Teamwork (and communication)	Succeeding in life isn't just about being able to work independently. It's about being able to work effectively alongside your customers, colleagues and peers. As a Staffordshire Graduate, you'll be an effective communicator and presenter. You'll also understand the significance of being a great team player. You'll respect other people's views and, when the time comes, know how to get the best out of colleagues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having enthusiasm • Being reliable and dependable • Communicating clearly and effectively • Being a good listener • Showing initiative Respecting the views of others • Being respectful and supportive • Staying calm in a crisis
Lifelong learner	<p>When you become a Staffordshire Graduate, we hope you'll remain a life-long learner. You'll understand that to succeed in life, you'll need to be at the top of your game and be willing to seize every opportunity to advance your knowledge.</p> <p>Technologically, digitally and information literate, you'll know exactly how to access the learning opportunities that are necessary for life-long success.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciating that knowledge doesn't stand still • Understanding the importance of keeping up-to-date with the latest approaches and technology • Identifying learning opportunities – and taking advantage of them • Having an inquiring mind and a thirst for knowledge • Being open to new ideas and opportunities • Taking responsibility for your own learning
Reflective & critical	We'll give you the knowledge and confidence to challenge conventional wisdom, think creatively and find refreshingly original solutions. You'll have the ability to consider why certain approaches worked, why others failed – and how things could have been done differently. When combined, you'll understand how to tackle challenges from different angles – and call on your analytical abilities to both create and discover new opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging convention • Thinking creatively • Evaluating information • Creating opportunities • Reaching well-considered decisions • Being enterprising and entrepreneurial
Discipline Expert	All our courses are designed to ensure you graduate with considerable knowledge and skills in your chosen discipline. Depending on the course, your expertise will be developed through lectures, seminars and tutorials; by conducting independent research, meeting industry experts and honing your skills using cutting-edge facilities. You can take advantage of study trips, work-placements, volunteering or being involved in community projects. Our links with industry, commerce and the public sector mean we're up-to-date with the latest standards to ensure you graduate an expert.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping up-to-date with the latest standards and requirements • Having an understanding of the latest thinking in your chosen field • Being knowledgeable in your subject area • Being competent in applying your knowledge and skills • Knowing how to solve specific business problems • Knowing how to apply your skills to solve non-familiar business issues

Table 1 – Staffordshire Graduate Attributes explained

The two modules that have been developed are a Level 4 module entitled Employability, IT and Reasoning Techniques and a Level 5 one entitled Employability and Project Management Techniques.

The aims of the Level 4 module are to introduce students to the attributes that they will/should possess as Staffordshire Graduates, enhance their career prospects by supporting the development of the skills that employers require. Furthermore, students are encouraged (via the assessment) to reflect upon their learning and current level of skills and set objectives for continuous improvement. Students are introduced to Personal Development Planning (PDP) and to the technologies that will facilitate such process. Employers require graduates not only to be Professional and a Discipline Expert but also to be a Global Citizen who is Reflective, Critical and Life Long Learner with excellent Communication & Teamworking skills. All these skills are practiced in this module through practical workshops, lectures, tutorials, and assessment, which has been designed to provide evidence of the level of students' abilities and skills. There is an emphasis in this module on learning by doing.

The learning outcomes are contained in the table below:

1. DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN THE USE OF WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS, BOTH AS AN INDIVIDUAL AND IN GROUP SETTINGS, EMPLOYING A RANGE OF TECHNIQUES AND TECHNOLOGIES
2. INITIATE THE COMPILATION OF A PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN
3. UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS OF CRITICAL REASONING AND EMPLOY THAT UNDERSTANDING IN SUPPORT OF THE STUDENT'S PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A LEARNER
4. DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN THE USE OF COGNITIVE SKILLS TO THE PROCESS OF RETRIEVING, ORGANISING, ANALYSING AND CRITICALLY EVALUATING INFORMATION RELATING TO ISSUES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF ORGANISATIONS

Table 2 – Learning outcomes of the Level 4 Employability, IT and Reasoning Techniques module

The module is delivered via focused workshops and supported by robust VLE content and it made use of both formative and summative assessment. This assessment involved the students writing a research paper where they write up research findings, present findings using PowerPoint presentation slides and illustrate the main points of the research in an academic research poster. In addition, the students were required to use the Staffordshire Graduate ePortfolio (PebblePad) system to develop and submit a Personal Development Plan (PDP). This PDP was tightly focused on the Staffordshire Graduate Attributes as students are required to reflect on their studies and put into the Staffordshire Graduate ePortfolio, as 'SGA Learning Experiences'. You should construct these using reflective writing techniques, and the quality of the reflections is one of the assessment criteria. Such reflections cover a range of evidence such as assignments submitted as part of the module formative or summative assessment, personal time management plans, reference/testimonials on performance on the job, sources (e.g. websites) that may be useful for further development or related to the module element etc. These reflections are linked to the level of skills needed to demonstrate the Staffordshire Graduate Attributes and are 'tagged' as such in the Staffordshire Graduate ePortfolio.

The Level 5 module aimed to extend the learning generated in the Level one through the development and enhancement of three main areas: skills to improve students' employability through critical reflection, ability to use a range of business management tools in the effective planning of a project and to improve academic writing skills to advanced level.

The learning outcomes are contained in the table below:

1. Self-evaluate and reflect on your progress in developing the attributes considered essential for the Staffordshire graduate
2. Demonstrate competence in a variety of skills associated with job interviews and professional writing through being a good communicator with the confidence to interact with a range of colleagues. Effectively communicate your skills and abilities to employers through the problem-solving and contextualisation of your own experiences in work-based situations
3. Be work ready and employable and understand the importance of being enterprising and entrepreneurial through the reflection upon your career goals in relation to your personal and professional development and citizenship
4. Have developed the skills of independence of thought and social interaction through teamwork, being critically self-aware of the demands while work-based and, more generally,

aware of the importance of team work skills in the working environment
5 demonstrate an ability to appraise the usefulness of planning, monitoring/control and closure techniques in an organisational context and the ability to apply project management tools and techniques throughout the project lifecycle

Table 3 – Learning outcomes of the Level 5 Employability and Project Management module
The assessment for this module covered the three content areas and consisted of:

1. PDP – Reflection on skills development and view areas for further personal career development. This element of assessment allowed the students to develop the skills developed in the Level 4 module and made use of the same ePortfolio and “tagging” system.
2. The development of a set of individual job application documents including:
 - a) Identify a sandwich course placement or graduate level job vacancy or a specific graduate scheme or a career progression route (if currently a full time employee) and provide a justification for the selection
 - b) Identify any possible gaps in current skill set Employability, IT and Reasoning Techniques
 - c) Propose how to address the gap(s) between the skills required and existing skills.
 - d) Develop a CV (max 2 pages) and a cover letter (max 1 page) both of which should be targeted at the vacancy/scheme/placement etc.
 - e) Complete the standard application form, which is attached to an assignment brief.
 - f) Create/further develop your own LinkedIn profile which by the submission date will include at least one recommendation and one endorsement of at least one of your skills by a professional or academic rather than a friend or classmate
3. Advanced Academic Writing assessment consolidating and testing research and referencing skills
4. Case study based project management assessment

This aspect of the project involved a number of different members of staff from various parts of the University, including module leaders and delivery staff.

The Business Management course leader was the subject lead on the What works? Student retention and success change programme and this ensured that there was a direct interface between the project and the course itself.

In addition, this project interacted with the Staffordshire Graduate Attributes project and the Business School lead on that project was also a member of the What works? Student retention and success change programme project to ensure that synergies were maximised and that lines of reporting were not confused.

In addition to the changes in content brought about by having modules specifically focused on Employability, the modules also made use of different and innovative assessment methods. This reflects Knight and Yorke (2003) identification of portfolio methods and both the Level 4 and Level 5 modules have students to developing Personal Development Plans using the Pebblepad system. Although Part-Time students were not directly part of the What works? Student retention and success change programme, there were some of these students and some mature students on the Full-Time Business Management course that felt they already had developed Employability skills in the work-place. However, as the impact section of this case study shows, students saw the benefit in a specific focus on Employability that is embedded in their course into their course and also we focused discussions with some Part-Time and mature students on the need to develop Employability skills even further than they had done so far.

The project was well-supported by the University and the project team (including all discipline leads) was led by a supportive Project Manager, with regular meetings and with sponsorship and guidance from the University management team. Adequate workloading tariff was provided to the Business Subject lead and this allowed for a real focus on the project and also to ensure that reports etc could be done in a timely and rigorous manner. To facilitate dissemination of the project and best practice, the subject leads from the three subject areas presented at the University's annual Staffest event, which brings together representatives from a wide range of academic disciplines and support services. In addition, the Business Management subject lead presented the work of the project at the Faculty of Business, Education and Law annual Teaching & Learning event.

[Evidence of impact](#)

The impact of this specific aspect of the project and, indeed, the project as a whole has been evaluated using a number of different data sets drawn from different areas of the University.

As there are a number of different influencers of behaviour and therefore it is impossible to truly isolate cause and effect based on intervention directly leading to different behaviours, this analysis also reflects the “straws in the wind” approach advocated by the overall What works? Student retention and success change programme and looks to gather data from a number of sources to demonstrate a trend towards improvement and success (or otherwise). This triangulation of data has allowed us to get the fullest possible picture of the impact of the project and reflects the complexity of analysing the impact of interventions on behaviour.

One of the benefits of a project such as this one, is the ability to collect and analyse data from firstly, specific course, secondly, courses across one institution and then finally, across all participants of the overall What works? Student retention and success change programme (some 18 different education institutions). This allows for comparisons to be made and lessons learnt across participants (both internal and external) in different operating environments. These surveys have involved asking students about their experiences of University across a number of different categories (Belongingness, Engagement and Self-Confidence). Table 4 shows how 1st year students viewed the three areas of Belongingness, Engagement and Self-Confidence during their 1st year in 2014 and 2015.

	All WW Participants		Staffs All		Staffs Business Management	
	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014
Belongingness scale	4.18	4.06	4.14	3.90	4.02	3.96
Engagement scale	3.86	3.84	4.02	3.95	4.04	3.92
Self-confidence scale	3.51	3.49	3.67	3.47	3.80	3.54

Table 4 – 1st year data on the three scales of Belongingness, Engagement and Self-Confidence

As can be seen, all areas (Belongingness, Engagement and Self-Confidence) have improved on the Business Management course from 2014 to 2015 on these two different sets of students.

To see if the same group of students found an ongoing impact, we looked at the 2014 and 2015 survey results on the students who were in year 1 in 2014 and who moved into year 2 in 2015 and this data is shown in table 5.

	All WW Participants		Staffs All		Staffs Business Management	
	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014
Belongingness scale	3.97	4.06	3.94	3.90	3.71	3.96
Engagement scale	3.90	3.84	3.97	3.95	4.04	3.92
Self-confidence scale	3.54	3.49	3.74	3.47	3.58	3.54

Table 5 - 1st and 2nd year data on the three scales of Belongingness, Engagement and Self-Confidence

As can be seen Engagement and Self-Confidence results have improved and although Belongingness has dropped, this reflects the experience of the overall What works? Student retention and success change programme.

These set of results reflects the positive impact that this intervention and also the project as a whole. The results for both Engagement and Self-Confidence for Business Management reflect well against both the wider Staffordshire University results and also against the project as a whole (e.g. all project participants). Belongingness results are slightly below the wider Staffordshire University results and also against the project as a whole. Although this is an area that has improved from 2014 to 2015, this data has provided us with the information to focus on this as an ongoing area and has resulted in a series of different actions to try and improve this further. For example, Business Management students have been taken on a specific fieldtrip and the creation of a Business Management Facebook group. An explanation for these specific results may be due to the nature of the Business Management, which is seen as somewhat “generalist” and students do not necessarily demonstrate the same vocational calling as they do for other related courses (such as Accountancy and Finance and Law). This means that they sometimes lack an initial association with the course, which we have attempted to develop through the actions of this project and also the course team.

A central aim of the University is to increase Employability impacts and the two Employability focussed modules are a core part of this objective. Therefore, we looked at the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data from the group of students that were the first to take these modules. This provided the following data¹:

124 total students in DLHE data set

73 in Full Time work

23 in Part Time work

11 Unemployed

14 Full-Time study

10 Part-Time study

2 Taking time out

5 Other

From this set we established that 55 of the above were in a Graduate Level role and the average salary of the Graduate Level role students who responded to this particular question is £22,255 p.a. The average salary of the 61 students (i.e. across all roles) who responded to this particular question is £20,270 p.a. The Complete University Guide state that the average starting salary in a professional job is £22,057 and in a non-professional job is £15,376 (source - based on HESA 2013-14 stats and found at <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/careers/what-do-graduates-do/what-do-graduates-earn/>). Therefore, the data suggests that our students in Graduate Level roles compares to the national average.

In addition, we looked at the Student Viewfinder Survey (SVS) data (a survey given to all 1st and 2nd year student) and this showed development in the following specifically targeted questions:

1. The University is committed to helping me increase my employability we have seen an increase from 73.7% in 2012/13 to 76.4% in 2013/14 (these questions were not asked in 2014/15).

¹ Please note that the slight discrepancy in the total being different to the classification entries is explained by students ticking multiple boxes (e.g. they are in Full-Time work but also studying part time).

2. My time at the University is helping to develop my employability skills we have seen an increase from 68.4% in 2012/13 to 74.6% in 2013/14 (these questions were not asked in 2014/15).

A key metric that the University and the project uses is to look at retention figures and levels of retention on Levels 4 and 5 have remained roughly the same over the 3 years of reporting, with a drop at Level 6 from 2013 (but at the 2012 levels).

Level	2012	2013	2014
4	85.1%	85.0%	84.8%
5	92.9%	93.5%	94.0%
6	95.2%	99.2%	95.7%

Table 6 – Retention figures on the Business Management course

An initial review of this data suggests that the intervention has not affected the retention figures but on further, more detailed, review of course grids from award boards does show that there is an impact of large 30 and 45 credit modules on the ability of students to achieve compensations and thus progression (i.e. students failing or not submitting an individual element of assessment for these large modules). Therefore, we feel that there has been a positive impact on retention from the project and its interventions, as it may have mitigated some of the unintended effects of these large modules. It should be noted that this data is for the suite of Business Management courses that the Business School runs, but trends are expected to be consistent across them and they provide a useful indication of the effect of the project.

It was also important to balance the quantitative data with that of a more qualitative nature and the open comments sections in the SVS survey and External Examiner comments supported the use of these two modules. For example, an External Examiner commented that the: "...curriculum is relevant and current", "...is monitored for suitability" and there is: "...evidence of good assessment design particularly in terms of preparation for employment" (Business Management Annual Monitoring Report 2013/14). From a student perspective, positive comments suggest that students see value in how the course has improved their employability prospects / confidence / awareness of global issues and life experience/problem solving.

However, this was balanced by some comments about the module being overly complicated, this reflected the desire of the teaching team to imbue the module with relevant content to its fullest extent. Also, students commented that there needs to be a clear progression between the PDP elements of Level 4 and 5. These comments resulted in the development of the modules to take on board these comments and these are discussed in more detail in the lessons learnt section of this case study.

Sustainability

The two Employability based modules are core to the Business Management course and remain important aspects of the course. The modules undergo review, both during and at the end of every academic year through the University Annual Monitoring Report process. This results in changes being made based on student (e.g. SVS survey and module monitoring forms) and staff (e.g. course team meetings) feedback and examples of this have seen the Level 4 module move from an intensive upfront delivery to one that is spread more evenly over the semester and also changes in content to meet student requirements more fully. These review activities will continue with the modules and they are firmly embedded in the Business Management course with a key role to play in furthering the University's focus on Employability.

Further development of these modules has resulted in the Level 5 module being accredited by the Chartered Institute of Management (CMI), which results in the students achieving an additional certificate when they successfully complete the module.

Lessons learnt

One of the benefits in being involved in a project such as this is the interaction with not only different course leaders etc. in the University, but also across the wider group of Institutions who participated in the What works? Student retention and success change programme. This provided opportunities for sharing information, best practices and the discussion on challenges being faced by others in the sector at the various workshops and sessions organised as part of the project and also at the regular "internal" project meetings. It also provided the participants in the project an opportunity to get closer to and more involved with different aspects of data, which could be used to inform decisions about making changes to the courses. This highlighted the importance of data, but also the need to closely ally data analysis with contextual factors to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of the situations and events. This should improve the quality of future decision making.

From a content/module perspective, interrelated modules such as these need to demonstrate clear progression in all elements and this was a challenge with the Employability elements of the assessment (via the PDP). This needed to go beyond merely asking the students to submit another PDP in Level 5. This differentiation was achieved by revising the assessment to focus on the students doing 25 hours of “work experience” and basing their PDP on this. This engagement in work related experience could include any of the following:

- Work placement
- Volunteering experience
- Social enterprise project
- Shadowing a manager as part of existing part-time work
- Organise and event or series of events
- Setting up a new club or society
- Anything that will help you develop the skills that you need to enhance your chances of getting the job you want – if unsure please discuss with your tutor

In addition, as these modules are run for all types of students, including Part-Time (in Employment and tending to be more mature) and linking the Staffordshire Graduate Attributes with their work environment allows these students to be more focused.

As discussed above, there were a number of dissemination events undertaken by members of the project team, but these tended to be at annual events and therefore in the future, more regular and less formal updates could be given via a different communication medium that could also involve a wider group of students more directly (i.e. there was a member of the Staffordshire University Student Union on the overall project committee). This could take the form of a specific Facebook group or use of the various Blackboard communication/collaboration tools.

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2. Case Study: Course Leadership and Personal Tutoring for a High Risk Engineering Foundation Group

Rationale for the case study

The Level 3 Foundation Year in Engineering (FYE), operated in the School of Engineering (SoE) at Staffordshire University since 12-13, is an important part of our recruitment strategy. The course attracts an extremely diverse group of applicants; over 4 recruitment cycles the makeup has been 19% mature, and 48% Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). Motivations for enrolling on what is effectively a feeder course for our on-campus undergraduate course include a significant proportion returning to learning. The majority are however 18-19 year-old home, EU and international students who are either making good a Level 3 results profile below our L4 entry tariff or "realigning" from a "non-STEM" set of A Level qualifications.

The students from the Foundation Year may go onto one of a number of named BEng(Hons) or BSc(Hons) Awards, making their choice at the completion of the level. The student profile above (and Table 1) indicates a significant proportion of speculative entrants and implicit in that, doubters (Foster et al 2012) with recognised potential vulnerability. Associated with this is the need for strong, objective and personalised direction in their choice of destination. There are other recognisable issues frequently reported from feeder and foundation-level engineering programmes both in UK and internationally, related to learning style, language (Ward, 2009) perceptions of relevance and importance of foundation subjects (Nelson, Shell, Husman, Fishman, & Soh, 2015), and the haste of many to be engaged in "real engineering" and design (Pace, 2000). This latter group of issues fall outside the scope of the intervention described but may well be factors where the intervention has had less impact.

The numbers on the FYE have grown by 120% over 4 cycles, and their progression now constitutes over 30% of our L4 entrants. Already armed with the culture and know-how of being a Staffordshire University undergraduate, they now have a strong impact on the culture of the awards they join, in some cases informally mentoring their classmates, and in some cases becoming highly effective reflective and critical student representatives. The case study investigates the methods and benefits of a fostering a strong identity for the Foundation Year and its sense of belonging, as well as the challenges which empowered and assertive students can bring, and how this may be harnessed. It also identifies the problems associated with low achieving outliers.

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

The initial intervention undertaken by the School of Engineering's (SoE) involvement in What Works? was a reinterpretation of the terms and role of the Personal Tutor. The intention was to improve retention rates in Level 4 engineering awards. A structured programme for individual and grouped personal tutees was introduced across all levels of courses in SoE for 2013-14. It was based strongly on the methodology employed by Anglia Ruskin University (McCary et al 2011), which itself was an outcome of the What Works? 1st phase, with a strong element of signposting at heavily scripted personal tutorials. The Level 3 FYE was included with the highest level of interaction. (6 Personal Tutor meetings per year, 3 individual plus 3 small group). Initially (12-13 and 13-14) the award leadership was provided by already heavily loaded senior lecturers, also responsible for separate challenging awards. Despite the broader successes of the personal tutoring initiative, retention in the FYE remained a problem in 13-14 with a significant number of pastoral issues and difficulties in providing and coordinating the right level of service for the group.

The increase in depth of intervention for 14-15 was to introduce an course leader with a specific mandate to encourage belonging, forge the cohort/award identity and to be especially proactive in communication on imminent issues such as deadlines, surveys, employability events and other retention-positive activities. This reinforced the messages promoted through the individual personal tutors, and also the consistency of the message. The course leader was also chosen to teach a core module to the entire group, giving the added advantage of regular scheduled sight and the opportunity for further interaction and distribution of "parish notices". An added consideration was the subject-neutrality of the course leader, with no vested interest in "steering" students towards a specific Level 4 award, and thus facilitating an objective and considered choice for their progression route. Finally, a much smaller group of personal tutors was selected to work closely with the group and to coordinate and triangulate with the course leader.

This was very timely as although there was no major expansion of numbers between 13-14 and 14-15, the cohort contained a tail of trailing/referred students which significantly added to the complexities of the leadership role.

What happened?

Following a strong start, with well-received team-based activities during the "Welcome" (induction) period, the group rapidly developed a much stronger and evident camaraderie than in previous years. Classroom behaviour was good natured and participative.

Within the cohort of 40, a small number of the most apparently strongly motivated (and slightly more mature) students rapidly rose to the challenges of transition and became bellwethers for many of the remaining students. They were vocal, both questioning and well-informed, becoming both formally elected (and informal) course representatives and strong contributors in all areas. Course management meetings were well attended with genuine and reflective comment on the experiences of the group and equally (and gratifyingly) positive comment on the content and organisation of the course. This came despite the unexpected departure of a core module tutor early in the first semester. Attendance was strong- any absenteeism was instantly noted and this high level of engagement correlated well with performance in first semester assessments.

The nature of the relationship between the students, the course leader and the small number of personal tutors led to a truly open-door approach, with many students feeling sufficiently comfortable to drop in unannounced frequently throughout the year often to pass on messages, check on dates and generally to "oil the wheels" of the course. This did however prove to be extremely time-consuming for the teaching team; a reality check for all concerned about the levels of support necessary.

The academic performance at the higher end of the scale was improved significantly over previous years. However, there was still a tail (and tale!) of poor performers. These lay predominantly amongst those who could not be encouraged to engage fully. There was a range of underlying causes, including original motivations to join the course (including parental influence), chaotic lifestyles, late starting and ultimately unsuitability for a numerate and science based subject. At the top end, there was a healthy competitive atmosphere and genuine dismay amongst several if a grade slipped below those of peers. The group was even observed running self-help sessions in classrooms, going over maths and science problems and generally bolstering each others' confidence.

The "engaged" sub-group also self-organised several extra-curricular technical activities- carrying out all of the associated planning and risk-assessment ahead of some small build and repair projects. However, the gravitational pull of this group diminished towards the end of the year as many of its members developed their own preferred styles of engagement. It was, however, an overall positive influence on many of the wider group.

The final successful aspect of the intervention was in the signposting and direction of students onto their future and further study.

In addition to guidance by personal tutors, there were a number of briefing sessions from course leaders for progression awards eg BEng(Hons) Mechanical Engineering, BSc(Hons) Aeronautical Technology, and students were encouraged to carry out a significant amount of reflection and planning in making their choice. When students chose (generally for personal reasons) to progress to courses in other schools, faculties or even institutions, there was a refreshing openness in the dialogue with the FYE course team

The intervention can be seen to have been successful at both a statistical and an anecdotal level. Whilst this cannot be regarded as entirely evidentiary, there is a broader confidence in the school regarding the security of the course and the preparedness of its output for further study.

Evidence of impact

A statistical approach to evaluating the impacts, whilst quite informative, cannot at this level of analysis provide the whole picture. There was a strong positive response from a sub-group, interestingly with "representation" from across the age, ethnicity and prior achievement range. By leading in course rep. roles, extra curricular activity, informal and formal feedback and general participation they gave a good impression of an invigorated attitude across the programme. This also manifested itself in a general improvement in academic standards from the course as a whole. However the gravitational pull of this group did not extend to all, and the performance statistics could be described loosely as "bimodal". However, the feelgood factor in the FYE was noticeable. Besides informal feedback, an award "exit poll" elicited a number of positive comments including "The staff on my course are all incredibly supportive of all students"²

Table 1 Course Makeup/Demographics

Totals	All New entrants	BAME		Mature	
2012-13	19	10	53%	3	16%
2013-14	39	17	44%	8	21%
2014-15	40	21	53%	8	20%

² Foundation Year Engineering Annual Monitoring Report 14-15

Retention and progression showed a small increase across the cohort. Comparing across the 3 completed cycles, and regarding students still known to be in full time study:-

Table 2 FYE Students still in F/T Study at 31/12/2015

Totals	All	Still Studying		BAM E	Still Studying		Mature	Still Studying	
2012-13	19	9	47%	10	4	40%	3	2	67%
2013-14	39	24	62%	17	9	53%	8	5	63%
2014-15	40	28	70%	21	12	57%	8	6	75%
2015-16	42	40	95%	19	19	100%	7	7	100%

The attrition in full degree has been generally lower. It is however still early to be sure about the progression of the class of 14-15 as they settle into their full undergraduate studies.

Engagement as demonstrated by attendance, including at assessments, was improved; perhaps as a consequence of better information or even "pester-power" from the award leader and personal tutors. Whilst this did not always translate into stronger academic performance, it did, in many cases unlock further assessment or referral opportunities which are only available under University regulations to students who have demonstrated engagement.

Performance was best measured by proportion trailing or in referral- effectively these students are held back by a year, as progression onto a Level 4 engineering course requires a clear profile. The numbers are slightly clouded by those who left the programme having been accepted into courses in other faculties or at other universities. The student trailing may, of course, be due to other non-academic reasons. However the intervention can be seen to have had a positive effect in terms of clean-up.

Table 3 Students Trailing the year/completing Part and Full-time.

Totals	All	Repeating
2012-13	19	0
2013-14	39	1
2014-15	40	5
2015-16	42	3

Sustainability

The intervention has proved to be not only sustainable but is now cited within the School of Engineering as an example of good practice. It has however been proven to be extremely resource intensive and has involved a reconsideration of the workloading for all colleagues involved. It may be that increased recognition and support is also indicated. (Morey et al. 2012) The model, tools and mechanisms used, continue to be developed and strengthened. Automated systems for attendance monitoring, due for 16-17 will remove a significant volume of the underlying work and will allow the course leader and personal tutors to respond more rapidly and to intervene sooner on non-attendance issues.

As an extremely positive outcome, a number of those progressing onto the full honours awards, disproportionate to the number in Level 4, have become course representatives, student ambassadors and are now in several cases informally mentoring the FYE. This would appear to be a sign of true belonging- one of the primary aims of involvement in the project.

Lessons learnt

The wisdom of using a highly engaged and dedicated course tutorship team may seem self evident; it is what most colleagues aspire to do- follow, nurture and support their students. However, few have/had experience of such a range and diversity of student types, ages and ethnicities in a single course, nor a group of such a range of academic backgrounds and motivations. Early engagement, mechanisms to sustain informal dialogue and contact and involvement in extra-curricular activities are all indicated. The value of engaging the willing in feedback and in course committees has been proven, but to an extent it is not this willing contingent who require the most attention. More likely to need stronger intervention, including by firmer deployment of regulations, are those who remain semi-hidden or go "under the radar". Our processes and approach need to foster engagement and involvement for all, as well as celebrating and encouraging the the higher profile successes.

There is further scope for subject-specific interventions and research; there is a reasonable belief amongst the team that underpinning language use, learning styles and perception of the foundation topics v "real engineering" remain a challenge. This would indicate some potential for interesting further work on the FYE students' engineering vocabulary, after that of Ward (2009). There may also be value in having the group, and individuals, reflect more formally, prior to progression, on the "added value" provided by the course- it is clear to the teaching staff that it is providing much more than a set of engineering "study skills".

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Engineering Discipline Lead, Staffordshire University: What Works? Student Retention & Success, Change Programme (2012-2015).

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3. Case Study: A student-led peer mentoring matrix to support retention and success

Rationale for the case study

This case study will discuss the design and implementation of a peer mentoring system within the Music Technology provision at Staffordshire University. It will cover discipline specific issues as well as a discussion of the challenges and lessons learned during the project. The case study will also highlight the relationship between engagement with the system and retention rates within the award area.

The system was designed for first year students (level 4 mentees) and utilised second and final year students (level 5, 6 mentors) offering pastoral, social and academic tutoring

This work builds on the findings of Phase 1 of the HEA What works? Student retention and success change programme; that students need to feel a greater sense of belonging through developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners, which is relevant to students' interests and future goals

Description/discussion of the intervention or change initiative and successful aspects

The peer mentoring system was instigated in the 2013-14 academic year and the students were appointed from a general callout of second and final year students at the beginning of term. This led to a team of eight mentors; 3 male, 5 female. Three of the mentors were final year students and five were second year students.

The mentoring activities offered were Pastoral, Social & Academic and the mentors each volunteered in the capacity that they were suited to best. This is shown in the matrix below.

Activity	M1	F1	F2	M2	M3	F3	F4	F5
Pastoral Have you settled in? Need someone to talk to? What happens in Level 5/6 of the courses Anything else???	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Social Where to go, what to do, social activities Anything else???	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Academic (Level 4 modules/software/hardware)								
Computer Sound/MaxMSP	*	*	*				*	
Audio Processing/Logic/sequencing	*	*	*	*	*		*	*
Studios					*		*	

Music Media and Web/Filming/editing/Photoshop				*	*	*		
Audio Visual Technology								
Music Law				*		*		*
Music Theory						*		*
Music Performance				*				*
Creative Music Technology	*	*	*		*		*	
Music Technology		*		*		*		
Music Technology with Management						*		*

The students were introduced to the first year students at the beginning of January 2014, the delay was due to the time taken organising a training session for the mentors. Academics introduced the mentors to the first year students in the first week of the second semester and then let the students introduce themselves and their services. Some students opted to talk to the mentors immediately and others contacted them later via email or facebook. It was always felt that the peer mentoring system should evolve during the course of the project and that the academics should retreat from its daily running to allow it to develop. This was based on research undertaken by Robin Clarke & Jane Andrews from Aston University which states that the system should 'grow organically'.

It was also hoped that the scheme would cover soft skills such as writing skills/referencing, finding/using resources, academic terminology/jargon although to my knowledge this did not happen.

The introductory session went well and some level 4 students spoke to the mentors at the end of the class to arrange mentoring sessions. The first question that we had from the mentors was 'how long should a session last' and 'how frequent should they be'. We suggested that sessions should not last longer than an hour and they should be no more than weekly. This was done to protect the mentors from overloading. Mentoring was on a 'one-to-one' basis but this could have been extended to small groups of no more than three.

We were aware that three of the mentors were giving regular sessions although this began to tail off as the semester went on. This was to be expected as the mentors would begin to focus on their own assignments. It was noted that level 6 mentors would ease off because of commitments to completing their Final Year Project, the most important part of their final year. Clearly this is a time that the mentees need more assistance but it is not possible for the mentors to give that.

It also became apparent that software tutoring was becoming fundamentally important to the mentees. This was because certain software packages could be used for several modules and extensive knowledge of these would prove extremely beneficial. Software training is not really part of the module syllabus and the Technician provided additional sessions where he went through useful shortcuts and exercises for the students. In the second year of the scheme, one of the mentors also provided a similar workshop which was very well received.

There is definitive evidence that the mentoring scheme saved at least one student, who admitted that he would have given up without the extra support. Other students were definitely helped in the first year of the scheme but no-one else said that they would have left without it.

The second year of operation (2014-15) benefitted from an earlier introduction of the mentors. This is because the previous level 5 mentors were now final year students and most were happy to continue their roles. Some did not (they went on placement) but further new level 5 mentors were found, again from a general call-out at in Welcome Week. A further initiative, newly introduced by the Faculty, resulted in funds being made available for an away-day activity whereby the level 4 students were taken to the Standon Bowers activity centre in Welcome Week. Here they took part in a number of team building activities which enabled the students to get to know each other and improved their sense of belonging – comments from a questionnaire gave evidence for this.

Some of the mentors came on the away-day and helped out with the activities. This was extremely beneficial to them as they clearly had a sense of pride in their work (and the University) and acted as good role models for the new students. The rest of the mentors were introduced in the first teaching week and mentoring sessions began similar to the previous year. The mentoring matrix was also made available on the University virtual learning environment (Blackboard) and was also presented in personal tutoring sessions.

By now a pattern was beginning to emerge:-

- Some students who needed help would engage in mentoring sessions quite quickly
- Students who were poor attenders did not. This is a shame because these students are those that would benefit the most from it.
- The 'best' mentors would become overloaded.
- It was noted that level 6 mentors would ease off in the second semester because of commitments to completing their Final Year Project
- It is important for the mentors to be given recognition for their work.

The third year of operation (2015-16) proved similar to the previous year. It was initially intended to trial an 'opt-out' system (whereby all level 5 student would automatically become mentors unless they opted out) but it was realised that this was unworkable. There were several reasons for this. One reason was that weaker students may end up giving incorrect information to the mentees or actually teach them bad habits. Another was that there were many ex-level 5 students wishing to continue mentoring in level 6 and new Level 5 students wanting to be involved. It was therefore felt that continuation as a voluntary scheme would be better. One level 5 mentor was very hard working and, after being introduced to the students early on, sat in on a level 4 class every Friday morning and often tutored 3 students. This was extremely helpful to the lecturer as these students were slowing the pace of the whole class. It was evident to the lecturer that this assistance boosted their performance in the semester 1 mid-year test. The mentor continued to assist in the second semester but this report is completed before the final test so their final performance cannot be commented on as yet.

Evidence of impact

The sense of belonging was improved – comments from questionnaire shows evidence of this as can be seen below.

	All WW Participants		Staffs All		Music Technology	
	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014
Belongingness scale	4.18	4.06	4.14	3.90	4.22	3.84
Engagement scale	3.86	3.84	4.02	3.95	4.12	4.00
Self-confidence scale	3.51	3.49	3.67	3.47	3.68	3.53
Sample size	3718	2536	78	106	20	44

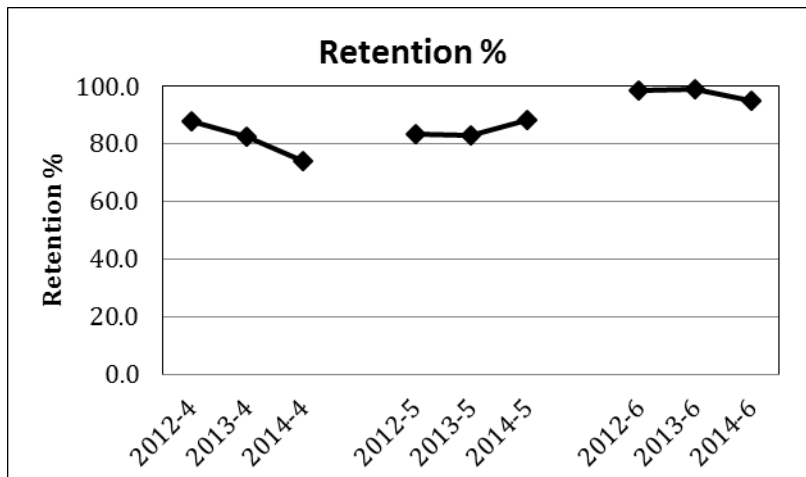
As can be seen, all areas (Belongingness, Engagement and Self-Confidence) have improved on the Music Technology course from 2014 to 2015. This reflects the positive impact that this intervention and also the project as a whole. The results for all aspects for Music Technology students are higher than both the wider Staffordshire University results and the project as a whole (e.g. all project participants).

The scheme provided a safety net for weaker students and a number of students have definitely been retained because of the mentoring scheme. It also acted as a safety net for students transferring in from other award areas, in fact two students who arrived after the normal University cut-off date for new students (end of week 3) passed the year.

The initial activities organised by the mentors and academic team was invaluable and engagement in these certainly changed attitudes. The activities ended up being mutually beneficial for academics, mentors and mentees and a typical student comment about the scheme is 'It is good to know they are there in case extra support is needed.

It was clear to see the confidence of the mentors improving and two of the mentors undertook some part time teaching at a local college after this experience. Several mentors achieved 1st class honours degrees, so this may have improved student attainment. However this cannot be quantified as a by-product of the scheme as they might have done anyway

Sadly the official retention figures did not bear out the benefits



The figures do not show an improvement in retention, in fact the reverse is shown. However the fall in 2014 (to 75%) is a blip and can be explained due to external factors.

There was a low intake in the year 2014-15 due to extraordinary circumstances. The announcement of imminent closure of the campus in September 2015 undoubtedly led to a smaller first year cohort any number of withdrawals or failures inevitably has a bigger effect on the statistics. Figures are expected to improve this year as first year numbers have risen substantially and, as yet, only two have withdrawn. It is a shame that the two late starters (who were retained) cannot be counted as replacement for two students who left almost immediately. With such small numbers on the award this would have kept retention above 80%.

An added benefit occurred in the second year of the scheme. Two students were allowed to transfer into the course past the normal three week cut-off date. They needed extra support and the mentors certainly provided some of that. One of these students transferred in from another course extremely late (week 8). Normally this is not allowed, but because of his background (he was on a science based award in another faculty) and because he would have left the University anyway he was given the opportunity to transfer award. The mentors helped with some of his work thus enabling him to catch up. Both students passed the year.

Another successful by-product of the scheme was the confidence gained by the mentors. After mentoring for two semesters (semester 2 of 2013-14 and semester one of 2014-15) two of the mentors were chosen to undertake some part time teaching at a local college. This was not previously an employment route that either had considered and both gained valuable experience from it. It is worth mentioning that both of these students gained 1st class honours degrees. One of the two students has subsequently gained an internship at the University, part of the role includes giving student support. His involvement in the mentoring scheme has undoubtedly played a part in both of these.

Sustainability

- The mentoring activities are now fully integrated into the course and welcome week activities. This will be further developed as the system has proved to be beneficial, even if only for a small number of students. A great deal of effort has been expended in setting up the system, so maintaining it at its current level with on-going refinements will not require a great deal of extra time.

- For 2016-17, the university is considering developing a peer mentoring policy that can be rolled out across all courses. The lead academic from the mentoring scheme is to meet with Academic Development Unit to discuss this shortly.
- The mentoring work needs recognition. Mentors get certificates that are provided by the Students Union upon completion of a number of hours (currently 7). Some students input considerably more time and it needs additional recognition. The work that the mentors undertake certainly ticks many boxes of the 'Staffordshire Graduate'.
- The Music Technology academic team intended to propose a lead mentor in 2015-16 who would run the mentoring scheme. The work undertaken would have been classed as part of a level 6 module 'Volunteering' which meant that the student would also gain academic credit for the work. This did not happen when the student opted to take a different module. but should be considered again in future years.

Lessons learnt

- Mentoring sessions should not last longer than an hour and they should be no more than weekly.
- It is important to get the right students to act as mentors. Several of the mentors so far have graduated with 1st class honours degrees. This is a potential problem if weaker students put themselves forward as mentors
- The scheme only really benefitted a handful of students overall as widespread participation did not happen. However, the system was certainly beneficial to those that used it and there is definite evidence that this helped retain a small number of students. This is a definite positive as the student numbers on the award are not high and therefore any extra students that were retained due to the scheme should be celebrated, especially as retention is now one of the University's main initiatives
- It was noted that level 6 mentors would ease off in the second semester because of commitments to completing their Final Year Project, the most important part of their final year. Clearly this is a time that the mentees need more assistance but it is not possible for the mentors to give that as it may affect their own progress.
- It is important for the mentors to be given recognition for their work. They were all awarded certificates (provided by the SU) once they had achieved a set number of hours mentoring. This is not enough and more should be done where possible. Our Faculty pays students to act as student reps on Open Days, so the mentors were used for this and they gained monetary payment for it. Other ways are needed to give them recognition, maybe related to the 'Staffordshire Graduate'
- It is important to introducing mentors early on, preferably in Welcome Week. Mentors should also be invited to any level 4 away day activity as this helps to foster an improved sense of belonging.
- Engagement in the mentoring scheme proved to be hard to measure accurately because only attendance in class could be monitored by the academics. Mentoring also took part outside of the classroom but was difficult to monitor.

- The use of a lead mentor would be beneficial. The student could co-ordinate the scheme, be involved in any difficulties that may arise, suggest solutions and record all the activities. The student could enrol on the 'Volunteering' module and this work would form the basis of the work for the module. This would help to answer the previous point
- The software training aspects involved in the Music courses are deemed to be significantly important, especially in Pro Tools and Logic (two types of software that are used extensively in the industry). Academic staff often build this training into teaching and delivery but students benefit from additional tuition outside of class time. Industrial qualifications are available in both Pro Tools and Logic (101, 110 & 200 series courses) and the team now provide these courses in-house and many students undertake them.
- Any peer mentoring system should evolve and be allowed to grow without academic input or interference

References

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