

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change

What Works? Student Retention & Success programme

Summary Report

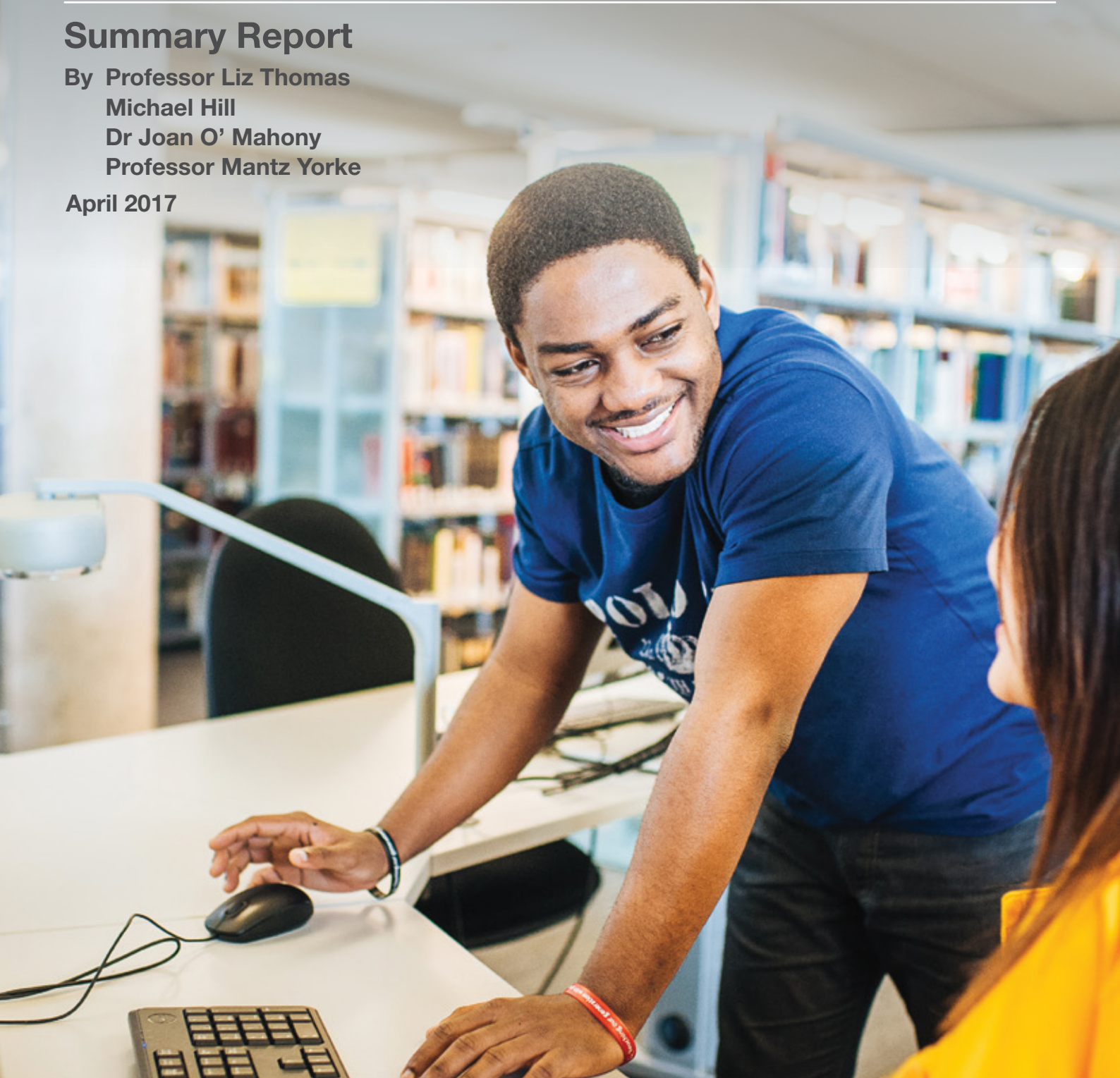
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Dedication

This report is dedicated to the memory of Lord Moser, KCB, CBE (1922-2015). As a trustee of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Claus Moser championed the need to support all students to benefit fully from university life. He was an advocate for the What Works? initiative and, as a member of its advisory group, his incisive questions and intellectual challenge helped to bring clarity to this complex area.

Acknowledgements

This initiative was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and delivered in partnership with the Higher Education Academy and Action on Access. We would like to thank all of the university partners, institutional and discipline teams for their full participation in this project and for sharing their learning with us. We are grateful to all colleagues from partner organisations, higher education institutions and beyond who have contributed to this programme from its inception in 2012. We also gratefully acknowledge the contribution of Advisory Group members.

Contents

Foreword	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Evaluation methodology	8
3. Understand the local contexts	10
4. Identify evidence-informed interventions to address the issues of concern	11
5. Review the institutional context	14
6. Design a process of change	17
7. Use monitoring and formative evaluation	21
8. Draw on organisational learning to embed, sustain and enhance the student experience and outcomes	23
9. Learning from the programme: Recommendations about how to implement effective change in a complex institution	26

Foreword

Every student that drops out of their higher education course is a loss: a loss to their university or college, a loss to the future economy and, above all, a loss to that individual. Equally, students who don't actually drop out but who fail to achieve their full potential also represent a significant loss to both themselves and society. The issue of student retention and success in higher education is, therefore, an issue that is becoming more important in the sector day by day. Maximising student success is not simply a 'nice thing to do'. It is a key element of institutional competitiveness in a higher education world that is increasingly characterised by business principles, in which teaching quality, student satisfaction and the achievement of graduates are core to institutional success. If helping students to 'be the best they can be' has always been a moral imperative for every university/college, being the best it can be is now also a concern that sits at the very heart of the institution as a whole.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the *What Works?* research has attracted a great deal of attention from all those who have an interest in promoting students' success, from policy makers to vice-chancellors, and from practitioners to students themselves. The findings of the first stage of the *What Works?* research published in 2012 were widely disseminated and discussed. They have become part of the established wisdom about how to help students remain committed to their studies and to be successful. But, important as these first-phase findings were, they were not designed to provide *specific* pointers for institutions concerning what kinds of interventions might be most effective in this respect, nor insights into the range of other factors that might need to be taken into account for a project seeking to build on the *What Works?* principles.

The generation of such insights was the focus of the work reported here. The report gives practical examples of a wide range of institutional approaches and specific interventions that have made a genuine difference to students' retention and success. Moreover, as a result of the sustained hard work of the 13 universities involved in phase two of the *What Works?* project, this report is able to offer a series of evidence-based principles to guide institutions across the sector as to how they might best engage with this vital agenda.

Research is a central element of university endeavour, so it is proper that the efforts higher education providers make to enhance the success of their students should be based on careful data collection and analysis. This final report of the *What Works?* project is based on evidence generated across a wide variety of institutions and subjects, interventions and approaches. Its rich range of insights and ideas offers a powerful platform on which to build a higher education sector that puts student success at its very heart.

Professor Patricia Broadfoot, CBE
University of Bristol
Chair, What Works? Advisory Group

1. Introduction

Improving retention and success is central to teaching excellence, and is a policy priority across the UK for moral, economic and legal reasons. This report is a summary of the findings and recommendations of the second phase of What Works? Student Retention & Success, a Paul Hamlyn Foundation initiative working with the Higher Education Academy, Action on Access and 13 UK universities. This second phase (referred to as What Works?2 hereafter) 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).

What Works?1 found that: *It is the human side of higher education that comes first – finding friends, feeling confident and, above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution – that is the necessary starting point for academic success.* The aim of the subsequent three-year programme of action research was to further extend knowledge of what works, and, particularly and crucially, develop an understanding of how to implement change in large and complex organisations.

The process has been effective, and has resulted in a wide range of positive outcomes for students and institutions. Improvements in the student experience and student outcomes included the following:¹

- First year continuation rates improved.
- First year attainment levels improved.
- Engagement in online activities increased.
- The number of assessments submitted increased.
- Success at first attempt in assessment increased and first year failure rates reduced.
- Levels of engagement, belonging and confidence increased.
- Internal transfers increased and withdrawals decreased.
- Fewer one-to-one tutorials were requested to discuss assessments.
- The attainment differentials between black and minority ethnic students and white students decreased.
- Fewer extenuating circumstances forms were submitted.
- Fewer student complaints were made.
- Student satisfaction increased.
- Employability was enhanced and positive feedback was received from employers.

¹ These outcomes are from at least one institution, but not all of these outcomes were achieved in every institution and discipline (fuller details are provided in the full report). It is important to recognise that improving retention and success is a highly complex matter: cause and effect cannot be proven, and not everything works.

Institutional outcomes included the following:¹

- Greater understanding of the issues impacting on retention and success was achieved.
- More integrated and up-to-date student data was made available to staff to inform their decision making.
- There was increased staff capacity to work across the institution and bring about change.
- Student voices were integrated into work across the institutions.
- Wider policy developments were informed by learning from the programme.
- Effective initiatives were rolled out across the institutions.
- Teams from other disciplines joined the process of implementing and researching change to improve the student experience and outcomes.
- There were more pedagogical research outputs.
- HEA Fellowships were awarded.

More broadly, institutions found the *What Works?2* experience to be highly beneficial – both directly and through capacity development – in enabling them to understand and address student retention and success issues and to manage the process of change:

‘What Works?’ has been pivotal in achieving a much richer, nuanced understanding of the factors that impact retention within the institution. Ongoing implementation of structured, supportive working with the programme teams that have the poorest retention rates, combined with improved data reporting and analysis, has given rise to important learning points. (University of Salford)

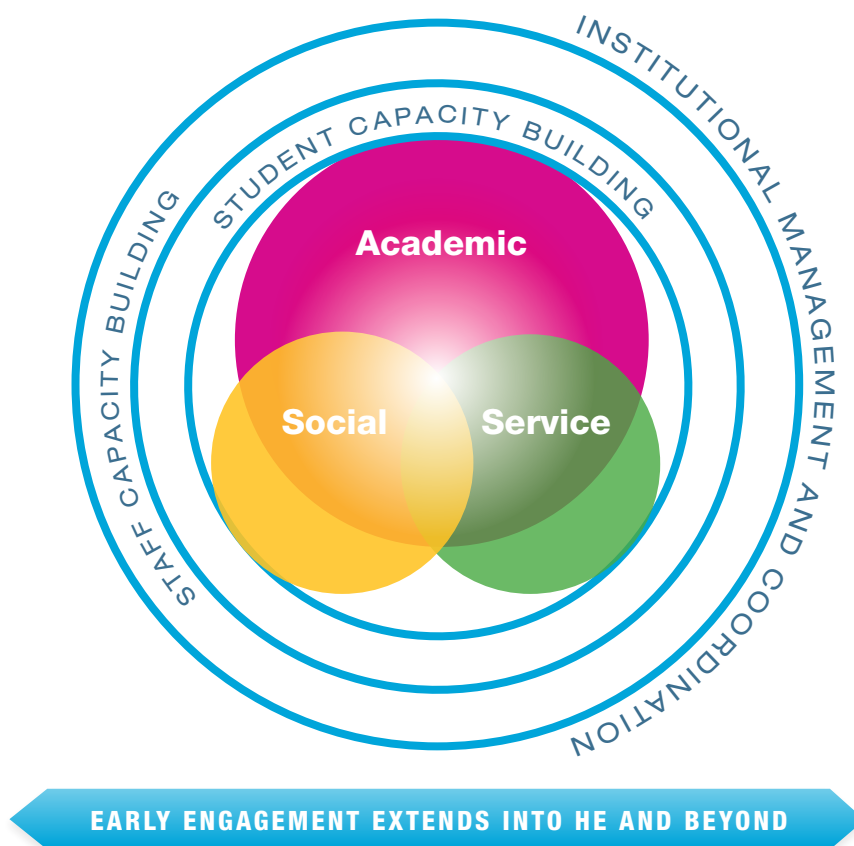
About *What Works?1*

What Works?1 projects examined various interventions and approaches to improving student retention and success. It emerged that the exact type of intervention or approach was less important than its intended outcomes and the way it was delivered. Interventions or activities should aim to enhance student engagement and belonging through supportive **peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, developing students’ capacity as successful higher education (HE) learners, and providing an HE experience that is relevant to students’ interests and future goals**, and should be planned according to and informed by the following principles:

- Interventions and approaches to improve student retention and success should, as far as possible, be embedded into mainstream academic provision.
- Activities should proactively seek to engage students and develop their capacity to do so.
- Activities need to be informative, useful and relevant to students' current academic interests and future aspirations.
- Early engagement is essential to student retention and success, with a variety of media being used to convey information.
- Activities should encourage collaboration and engagement with fellow students and members of staff to develop meaningful relationships.
- The extent and quality of students' engagement should be monitored, and followed up where necessary.

*What Works?*¹ found that although the focus of efforts to improve student retention and success needs to be on academic programmes, this should be promoted and facilitated at the institutional level, with all that this implies about leadership, management and the institutional infrastructure.

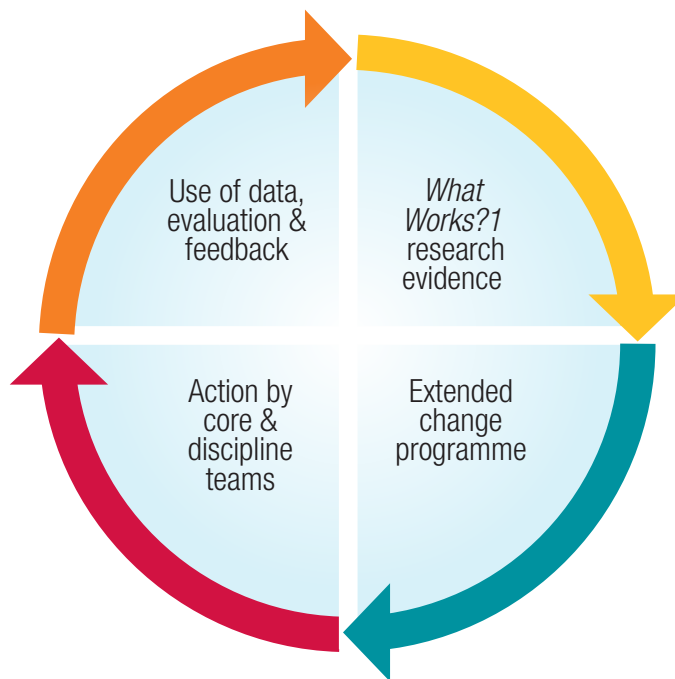
Figure 1: Model of student retention and success from 'What Works?1'.



About *What Works?2*

What Works?2 worked with 13 institutions and 43 discipline teams (listed below) to help them put this learning into practice, evaluate the impact, and expand understanding of what works and how to implement change. This was facilitated through an extended change programme led by the Higher Education Academy, process evaluation led by Action on Access, and impact evaluation commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Figure 2: ‘*What Works?2*’ model of working



The extended change programme involved a mixture of cross-institutional meetings and residential events, site visits, structured reporting and feedback, and a mixed methodology evaluation. Each institution was required to identify a cross-institutional team (including a project manager, senior manager, data expert, student and academic member of staff) and three discipline areas in which to develop interventions. The participating institutions and discipline teams (and the associated acronyms used in this summary to identify specific institutions) were:

- Birmingham City University (BCU): Built environment, media and radiography;
- Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU): Business, engineering and life sciences;
- Newman University Birmingham (NUB): Initial teacher education (ITE), Joint Honours with Education and Multi Professional Practice (EMPP) and Working with children, young people and families (WCYPPF);
- Staffordshire University (STU): Business, engineering and music technology;
- St Mary's University, Twickenham (SMU): Business management, drama and sports science;
- University of Brighton (UOB): Applied social science, business management and digital media;
- University of Chester (UOC): Criminology, computer science and psychology;
- University of Glasgow (UOG): Education/Interdisciplinary studies, engineering and life sciences;
- University of Salford (UOS): Aeronautical engineering, music and performance and sports science;
- University of South Wales (USW): Business management, computing and music technology;
- Ulster University (UU): Accounting, built environment, computing, creative technologies, law, nursing (mental health) and textile art, design and fashion;
- University of Wolverhampton (UOW): Art and design, bio-medical sciences and sports sciences; and
- York St John University (YSJ): Occupational therapy, sports science and theatre.

There were no requirements concerning specific interventions, but all were required to fall into at least one of three categories: induction, active learning and co-curricular (identified from *What Works?1*). They also had to be informed by the findings from *What Works?1*.

Summary and recommendation (1)

The *What Works?2* model of working, combining research evidence from *What Works?1*, an extended change programme, a cross-institutional team (including students taking action), and the use of data, evaluation and feedback, helped institutions to meet existing and emerging challenges to improve student retention and success. It is recommended that other institutions seeking to develop excellence in learning and teaching and improve the student experience and outcomes adopt a similar whole-institution approach.

2. Evaluation methodology

Evidence was central to the design and implementation of *What Works?2*. The aim of the evaluation was threefold:

- Evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the programme of change (including identifying specific practices).
- Research the process of change.
- Use the emerging evidence to improve interventions and effectiveness in participating institutions.

The mixed methodology evaluation design comprised three distinct strands, focusing on overall impact, the process of change and local evaluation (at institutional and course levels). The evidence was collected through a range of methods (outlined below) and applied within an action research paradigm, meaning that findings have been used throughout the programme to inform ongoing improvements to the process, interventions and outcomes.

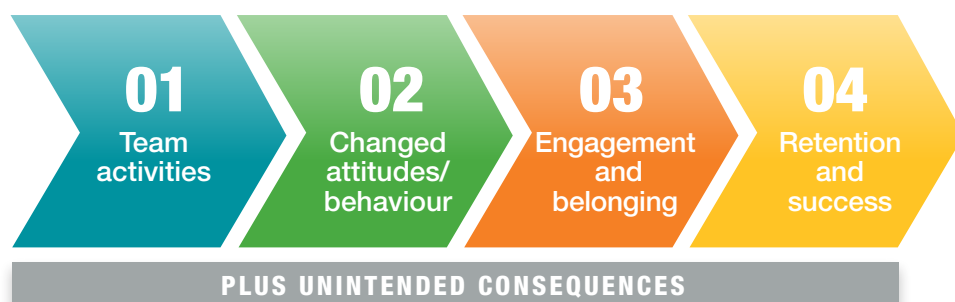
The impact of the 13 universities' interventions was tracked in two ways:

- A survey instrument indexing the students' sense of 'belongingness', academic engagement and self-confidence was developed for *What Works?2*; it used 16 items to create three largely independent scales. It was administered seven times, starting in November/December 2013, and had a total of 17,242 responses. The results were fed back to institutions to help them develop and refine their work.
- Institutional data measuring continuation and assessment was collected from institutional management information systems, standardised and used to compare cohorts over time.

The research examining the process of change used naturally occurring information (e.g. through institutional reports, cross-institutional events and site visits) and evidence collected specifically through semi-structured interviews and a primarily qualitative survey.

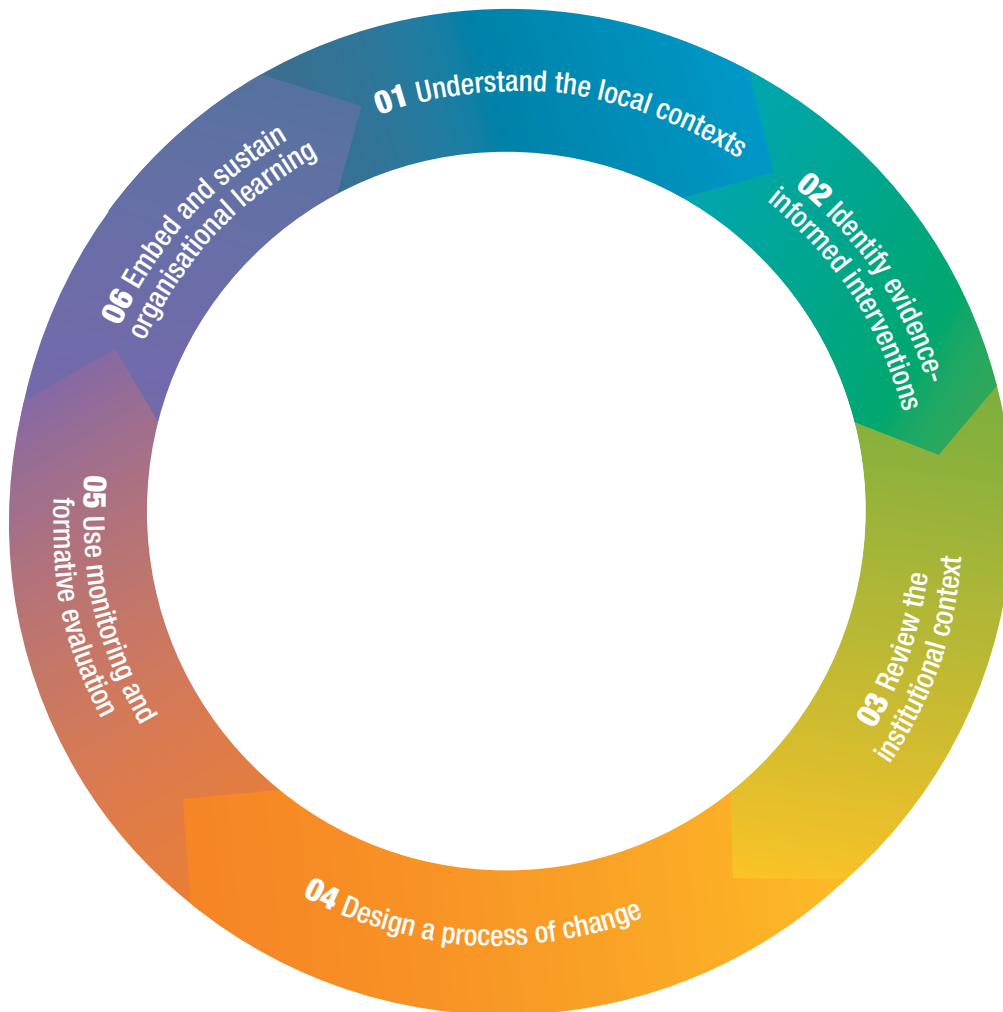
Each institution and/or discipline team developed their own local evaluation to reflect the objectives of their interventions. An evaluation logic chain was used to articulate the relationship between interventions and improved retention and success, to check the 'logic' and to help identify both suitable indicators of success at each stage and appropriate methods for checking progress towards these outcomes. In addition, teams were looking for any positive or negative unintended consequences for the student experience.

Figure 3: Generic 'What Works?2' logic chain



Drawing on this evidence, *What Works?2* has reinforced and extended learning from *What Works?1* about the characteristics of effective interventions, and gained a valuable insight into how to implement change in large, complex organisations to improve students' experiences and outcomes. These findings are represented in Figure 4, highlighting the stages that others wishing to improve student experience might find it useful to be guided by.

Figure 4: Overview of learning from *What Works?2* about implementing change



Summary and recommendation (2)

A mixed methodology evaluation, informed by a logic chain to map the relationship between interventions and intended outcomes, while recognising both positive and negative unintended consequences, contributed to achieving the three *What Works?2* evaluation objectives. It is recommended that a logic chain and mixed methods, including naturally occurring data, are used by others wishing to use evidence to understand and improve student retention and success.

3. Understand the local contexts

There is strong and clear evidence that **'one size does not fit all'**, and thus there is no single intervention that will address the complexity of student success. However, greater effectiveness is achieved by understanding the local contexts (institution, discipline, module, cohort, etc.) and then intervening appropriately. Understanding the local contexts includes a number of dimensions:

- Identifying disciplines, courses and modules with lower than expected rates of success (e.g. continuation, progression, completion, attainment);
- Looking at student characteristics or groups with success issues;
- Understanding the specific success challenges in each discipline, programme or module in relation to student characteristics.

While most institutional teams identified disciplines, courses and modules with lower than expected rates of success, the majority did not focus on the needs of specific groups of students within these courses, with a couple of notable exceptions. But the *What Works?2* survey found that **non-white students and students with higher levels of 'adverse circumstances'** (especially travelling to study) **have lower levels of belongingness** – and this largely corresponds to national evidence about student characteristics associated with **lower rates of retention and attainment**.

Across *What Works?2*, the specific retention and success challenges differed by context (including discipline, year of study, student characteristics, organisation of learning, internal or external changes). Evidence generated through *What Works?2* sometimes challenged widely held views and provided a better understanding of what the fundamental issues and the most appropriate interventions for addressing them were.

Both institutional data and qualitative research were used to understand the context, including which students leave (and when and why) or which students have lower rates of attainment and why.

Once a greater understanding of the issues was gained about where the problems were, who was not being successful, when the problems were occurring, and what the issues were and why, it was easier to identify suitable interventions to address these challenges.

Summary and recommendation (3)

In order to maximise the impact of efforts to improve student retention and success, it is valuable to understand the local contexts, including the disciplines, courses and modules with lower than expected rates of success; the characteristics of students or groups with success issues; and the specific issues contributing to these outcomes by drawing on a range of evidence sources. It is recommended that institutional data and qualitative research are used to understand which students leave (and when and why) or which students have lower rates of attainment and why, before specific interventions are selected.

4. Identify evidence-informed interventions to address the issues of concern

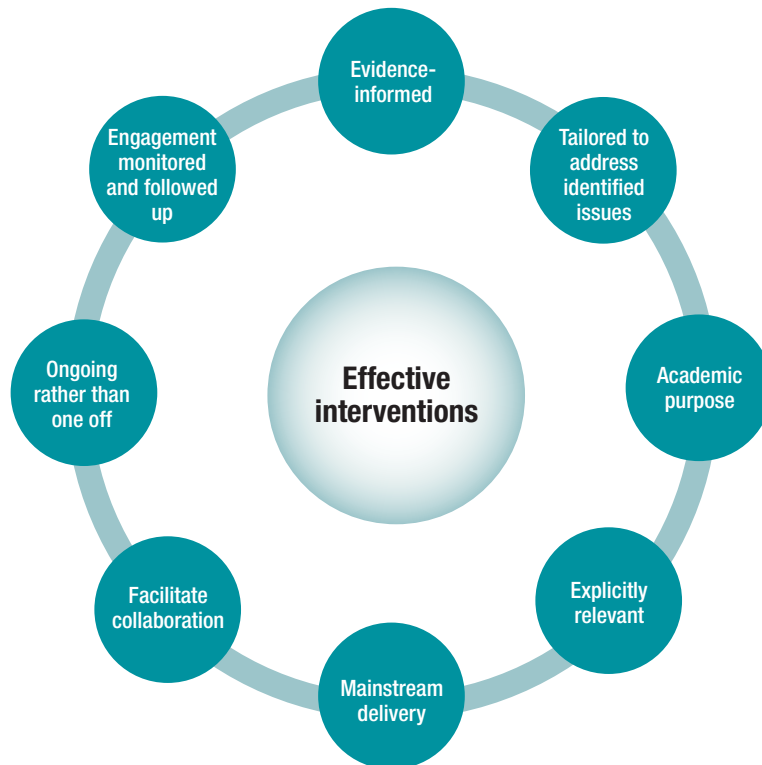
The interventions are more effective if they address the issues of concern (as discussed above), and if they are research-informed, drawing on both national and local evidence. For example, UOW made excellent use of internal and national research to understand the issues contributing to the lower attainment of black and minority ethnic students, and to develop interventions targeting them. Institutions revisited evidence from *What Works?1* when interventions were not working, and new research conducted by the programme and institutions was used to make continual improvements to the interventions.

Drawing on the institutional data in particular, and also the survey data and local evaluation evidence, a set of particularly instructive interventions has been identified:

- *Building engagement and belonging through pre-entry webinars, student profiling and interactive induction, Business Management, USW*
- *Developing interventions to support undergraduate trainee-teachers, ITE, NUB*
- *Are You Ready for Drama St Mary's? Preparing students for vocational training programmes in higher education institutions, Drama, SMU*
- *Enhancing Induction to promote Belonging and Professional Identity of Mental Health Nursing Students, Mental Health Nursing, UU*
- *Active learning elements in a common first year engineering curriculum, Engineering, UOG*
- *Introducing E-tivities to improve student engagement and success, Education Studies (part of EMPP course), NUB*
- *Inclusive assessment approaches: Giving students control in assignment unpacking, UOW*
- *Cloth, Colour and Communities of Practice: embedding co-curricular learning in Textile art, Design and Fashion, Textile art, design and fashion, UU*
- *A changed culture through personal tutoring, Music and Performance, UOS*
- *Student Success Advisors – A hybrid role starting in the School of Media...., Media BC*
- *Academic advising and employability awareness, Business, GCU*
- *CLANs – Peer mentoring on a rural campus, Inter-disciplinary Studies, UOG*
- *Building the Environment: Academic Mentors and Enhanced Communication Supporting Transition and Building Belonging, Built environment, UU*

- *A student-led peer mentoring matrix to support retention and success, Music Technology, STU*
- *What Works? Induction activities for sport science students: Nothing works for everyone...., SMU*
- *The project as an enabler of change, USW*
- *Benefits of embedding a project team within existing university structures, UOG*
- *Building capacity for student engagement through a staff-student partnership approach, UU*
- *Data which informs strategic development, USW*

Analysis of these interventions has further developed understanding about effective interventions; this has reinforced and extended learning from *What Works?1*. **Relevant** and **mainstream** interventions, with an explicit **academic** purpose, that promote **collaboration** and **monitor individual student engagement** stand out as particularly important, but were sometimes overlooked in early attempts to introduce new interventions. Individual student engagement needs to be monitored and those students who are absent or not engaging must be followed up. In addition: **one size does not fit all**; rather, interventions ought to be **tailored** to address the issues experienced in specific disciplines and in relation to the characteristics of the student cohort. Furthermore, **one-off activities are insufficient**: improving engagement and belonging should extend throughout the first year student experience, either through **ongoing interventions** (e.g. active learning, personal tutoring or peer mentoring) or through a **programme of linked engagement activities** (often starting pre-entry and including a focus on potential future employment outcomes). The revised features of effective practice are summarised in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Features of effective practice**Summary and recommendation (4)**

The most effective interventions were informed by the issues of concern in a specific context on the one hand, and a tailored programme of interventions informed by research evidence about what works on the other. A review of effective interventions in *What Works?2* resulted in a renewed list of features of effective practice. Effective interventions had an academic purpose that was explicitly relevant to students and were delivered in the mainstream to all students, facilitating collaboration between students and with staff. Effective interventions were ongoing or part of a programme of interventions, and individual student engagement was monitored and followed up as necessary. It is recommended that an evidence-informed programme of interventions is designed to address the issues of concern, drawing on the features of effective practice identified here.

5. Review the institutional context

What Works?2 teams operated at a minimum of two levels: the discipline and the institution. While success could be achieved locally, some institutional-level factors were found to be valuable to support and facilitate student retention and success:

- Leadership and management support at all levels for retention and success;
- Alignment of institutional policies and procedures to enable student retention and success;
- Staff engagement facilitated through recognition, development and reward;
- Provision of data that can be used to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success.

A review of the institutional context based on these factors could be useful in helping to assess institutional readiness for change.

Leadership at all levels

A leadership culture that prioritises, values and supports change to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success in activities to improve student retention and success is very valuable. It demonstrated the importance of the issue, which in turn promoted wider staff engagement and helped to overcome institutional blockages. Discipline team leaders embraced the challenge of pedagogical development, and became champions in their areas and beyond, enthusing other staff to do likewise. Leadership and management support were valuable at all levels, including within academic areas, not just at the senior institutional level, and will be crucial as the focus of teaching excellence moves towards specific subjects and courses.

Alignment of institutional policies and practices

Leadership and management support can be translated into institutional policies and procedures. In some cases this was achieved by using evidence from *What Works?2* to inform institutional policies and processes, and in other cases to align retention and success goals with other institutional priorities. Conversely, institutional procedures and regulations could create unnecessary barriers to colleagues seeking to implement student-centred interventions.

It was found that opportunities to align policies and procedures could be enhanced by ensuring the project team was embedded within and reported to the institutional committee structure. Being integrated into the formal reporting structure raised the profile of student retention and success, and promoted understanding of the local issues and what could be done at the institutional level. It also allowed the findings from *What Works?2* to be adopted more widely, influencing the strategic direction and implementation in some cases. For example, at UU findings from *What Works?2* influenced the learning and teaching strategy and the principles and framework for implementation.

Staff engagement

Challenges were experienced in wider staff engagement across all participating teams. The institutional reports identified ways in which the institution could promote and facilitate staff engagement at the institutional level:

- Work allocation model;
- Staff development and support;
- Opportunities for pedagogical research and development;
- Routes for recognition and promotion based on engagement in student success activities.

Each of these has relevance for both the team members implementing change and the wider staff body.

Providing staff with time to undertake the work associated with managing, planning, implementing and evaluating change was widely recognised as a challenge across the institutions, which was, at least in part, alleviated by a work allocation model. This does not ensure staff engagement, but it is an important starting point for engaging staff across the institution, and it provides recognition for team members.

Staff development was identified as a means to support colleagues to understand and develop skills to contribute to new ways of working; this ranged from one-off events to institution-wide programmes. Several institutions produced staff development materials and modules as part of the *What Works?2* programme, with BCU, for example, even integrating them into its postgraduate courses for staff. Others, such as USW, used students, which proved to be very effective.

Team members, especially those in the disciplines, benefited from support with their role as change agents. This included practical assistance and developmental opportunities from the core team and the extended change programme. Viewing their evaluation work as pedagogical research helped them to develop expertise and capacity, and to gain recognition as experts. A significant number of pedagogical research conference presentations and publications was produced. These are of great value in and of themselves, but also contributed to the development – and reward – of the individual members of staff involved.

Finally, staff engagement was enhanced through greater recognition of the value of the work being undertaken. UOS was successful in creating new opportunities to recognise and reward staff engagement in student success activities through honorary titles and promotion routes. Another way in which the contributions and development of the staff involved in *What Works?2* have been recognised has been through HEA Fellowships.

Data provision

The provision of data is an important example of an institutional enabler required to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success – and was addressed by all participating institutions. Data was required at all stages of the process of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating change (and is discussed in section 7). It is therefore essential that staff across the institution have ready access to meaningful data and evidence to inform processes and outcomes. This data needs to be available at different levels of detail to inform colleagues' work. Without exception, the participating institutions worked to make their data more useful to the process of improving student retention and success.

Summary and recommendation (5)

While the primary interventions were located in the academic sphere, they were facilitated and enabled by the following institutional-level factors: leadership and management at all levels, including discipline champions; the alignment of institutional policies and procedures; recognition, development and reward for staff engagement; and the provision of data to be used to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success. It is recommended that where these enabling conditions are not fully in place, the appropriate institutional-level changes are implemented. Without these in place, success at the discipline level may be impeded. These factors should, therefore, be reviewed to assess institutional readiness for change, and subsequently be addressed.

6. Design a process of change

Knowing what the issues are and what to implement and ensuring a facilitative institutional context was only part of what was required. A key aspect of success was translating knowledge, plans, commitment and support into practice and outcomes. Through *What Works?2*, different models and approaches to implementing change were uncovered and made explicit. Key findings included:

- A structured approach to organising and managing change is useful, and sufficient time is required to research, plan, implement and evaluate change.
- A cross-institutional team, with clear roles and people operating at different levels within the institution, is vital.
- Engaging students in the process is highly beneficial.
- Ensuring staff engagement is essential but can be challenging.
- Senior management support and leadership is crucial.

Organising and managing change: Structure, roles and ways of working

The three-year extended change programme developed and employed by *What Works?2* provided a structured approach to implementing and managing change, with a level of external support and scrutiny. The programme was valuable in helping to keep teams on track, providing external expertise and pushing for evidence and consideration of the implications. The timeframe of three years was important, as new evidence emerged that led to ongoing improvements to the work being done – and ongoing work is reaping further rewards. In other words, implementing and experiencing the impact of change takes time, and benefits from a structured approach.

What Works?2 involved discipline teams working with a core, cross-institutional team. This recognised that there is a range of expertise and spheres of influence that need to work collaboratively to plan, manage, implement and evaluate complex change. Clear roles assisted the effective implementation of change. The role of the discipline teams is relatively straightforward to conceptualise: to implement activities and changes for students registered on programmes that are designed to improve engagement, belonging, retention and success. The function of the core team was not immediately obvious, but can now be seen to straddle three areas: coordinating and supporting the work of discipline teams; data and evaluation roles; and engaging with the wider institution.

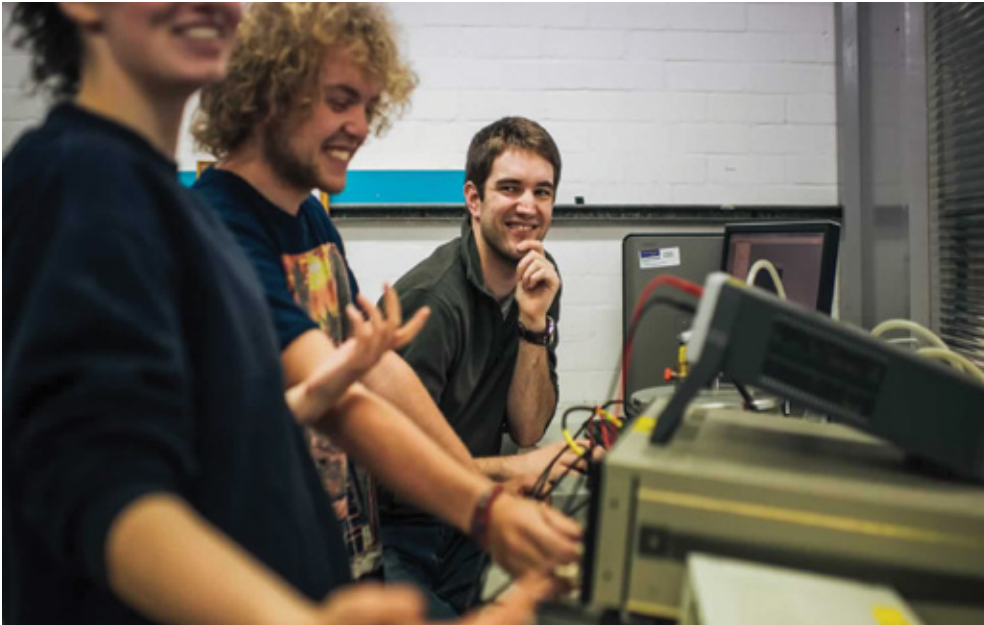
Models of working could be characterised as tending to be ‘top down’, ‘dispersed’ to the disciplines, and ‘integrated and collaborative’. The evidence suggests no clear prescription for an effective model of managing change, but there is a strong need for ‘ownership’ by discipline teams. This makes a wholly top-down approach less effective; however, central intervention from a senior member of staff to overcome institutional blocks was very valuable, making a wholly dispersed model challenging. In addition, wider staff engagement was an ongoing challenge requiring support and collaboration. Thus, overall, integrated and collaborative approaches tended to achieve better results.

Student engagement

While student engagement in the process of change has proven to be beneficial, some teams experienced the challenges associated with the extended time frame (given the regular changes to staffing in student union and student committee bodies), and finding a meaningful role for students. Students were involved in the process of change in a variety of ways, including:

- Re-designing the curriculum contents or delivery, drawing on their own experiences (including from placements);
- Supporting, mentoring and coaching first years;
- Organising academically-relevant social events and connecting with professional bodies;
- Delivering outreach, recruitment and induction activities;
- Collecting data to inform the development of interventions and for the evaluation;
- Campaigning and raising awareness of student retention and success issues with other students and ensuring students have a voice in the development of policy and practice;
- Arranging staff development events drawing upon students’ experiences and expertise.

Students from specific courses were widely utilised, especially course reps. Elected students’ union officers were less widely used, which may be due to the difficulties associated with elected representatives usually only being in post for one year. Successful strategies for engaging students in the process of change included building on existing relationships (e.g. between teaching staff and students); explaining what was required and why it was important; valuing their contribution; and using existing structures for engaging with students, including the student representation scheme and taught sessions (e.g. to conduct research to inform new initiatives or as part of the evaluation).



Staff engagement

Wider staff engagement was reported as the biggest implementation challenge. While staff engagement can be facilitated by institutional structures and processes (listed above), discipline teams also employed a range of local tactics to engage their colleagues, which centred around constantly referring to the work they were doing, and the emerging evidence about the benefits to individual students, the wider student experience and outcomes, and their own personal growth and development. Sometimes, this was through formal channels within academic areas and the wider institution (discussing at team meetings and presenting at learning and teaching events, for example), but often it was directly to friends and colleagues through informal networks. At the institutional level, formal mechanisms for reporting and sharing needed to be used, and this contributed to aligning this work with other institutional agendas. Engagement was encouraged by promoting staff ownership of the issues and the solutions, and the power of ‘evidence’ could not be underestimated. As colleagues witnessed positive outcomes, there was greater interest in participation, and in some institutions this resulted in discipline teams joining the programme.

Senior management support

Most institutions reported good senior leadership support for their work, but where this was not the case, significant effort was invested to sell the vision and promote the benefits of engagement. It has become clear that leadership support is necessary at all levels – for example, within academic areas as well as at the top/centre of the institution. Discipline leads operated as effective champions for the disciplines, and worked to enlist local leadership support. Core and discipline teams used a range of strategies to engage managers who could encourage and facilitate, or discourage and block, change. This included formal channels to raise awareness, as well as informal meetings and links to wider institutional priorities and agendas.



Summary and recommendation (6)

A process to implement and manage change contributes to effectiveness. This requires explicit goals and timelines that are enforced, and a cross-institutional team with clear roles; effective working is facilitated by an integrated and collaborative approach. Wider staff engagement is essential, and involves the use of both institutional structures and local encouragement, promoting staff ownership of the issues/solutions and drawing on emerging evidence of impact. Student involvement in the process of change is beneficial, and can usefully draw on students studying the discipline in question, e.g. through the representation system or taught sessions. Managers at all levels also need to understand and support the process, and enthuse others to engage – ideally leading by example. While suitable data needs to be available, it is also necessary for staff to be supported to use this data to improve student retention and success. It is recommended that a process of change is deliberately designed, taking account of structures, roles and ways of working, and proactively engaging staff, students and managers at all levels, drawing on the enthusiasm of champions.

7. Use monitoring and formative evaluation

Access to high-quality data and undertaking evaluation were ongoing priorities throughout the programme, and these need to be used to improve students' experiences and outcomes. In particular, this was achieved through:

- Monitoring students at the individual level;
- Conducting formative evaluations of interventions.

Monitoring engagement

However good – or otherwise – interventions are, students who do not attend them – even when they are embedded into the core curriculum – will not benefit from them, and they may be vulnerable and at risk of withdrawing. Monitoring individual participation, engagement and performance and following up students emerged as essential ways to improve retention and success. This was implemented in different ways across the institutions, sometimes combining data from different sources:

- Attendance data;
- Data on participation in co-curricular activities;
- Interaction with the virtual learning environment (VLE);
- Institutional survey data;
- Module or course evaluations.

In some cases, attendance and participation monitoring was done electronically; in other instances, it was done manually. Irrespective of this, personal tutors were the preferred way of communicating with students who appeared to have low levels of engagement based on this type of data, and evidence from UOG found that students were comfortable with being monitored and felt that it encouraged them to attend.

Formative evaluation

All teams evaluated their interventions: much of this evidence was formative and used to improve the effectiveness and impact of the interventions. Two broad approaches were identified – **centrally-led** and **locally-led** evaluations – and these were employed by four and nine universities respectively.

Centrally-led evaluation was typically designed and managed by staff in the central project team. The majority of these approaches provided a well-thought-out evaluation model that was effective in identifying evidence of impact. This was subsequently communicated to discipline teams and utilised. The evidence generated in each of these universities was used to inform and facilitate change at the institutional level, as well as at the course level.

Locally-led evaluation was intended to encourage discipline teams to 'own' the evaluation strategy. In the best cases they were supported by the central project team, by, for example, being provided with a reporting mechanism through which feedback on the project was transmitted to institutional strategic groups concerned with retention; advice on the evaluation methodology; practical help with collecting qualitative evidence; and management of the acquisition and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as its dissemination to the discipline teams. This resulted in discipline teams developing an effective mixed-methods approach to meet their own evaluation needs, and this evidence was fed by the core team into the institution to influence wider policy and practice.

By integrating research and evaluation into the process, it was easier to identify emerging problems and rectify them or look for alternative interventions and approaches. This contributed to the ongoing refinement and improvement of interventions and contributed to wider organisational learning.

Summary and recommendation (7 & 8)

Monitoring and formative evaluation were key to success. Monitoring enabled individual student behaviour and performance to be tracked – and additional interventions to be made if necessary. A range of indicators and approaches was used to monitor students, although personal tutoring was the primary vehicle for follow up. Formative evaluation was used to understand how interventions were working and to make adjustments. Two models emerged from this: centrally led and locally led. The most effective approaches recognised that academic staff benefited from support to evaluate their work and mechanisms to feed it back into the institution to effect wider change. It is recommended that institutions consider which indicators of engagement, performance and satisfaction they use, how this information will be collated, who will intervene and how students will be supported. The adoption of a mixed-methods model of evaluation that provides discipline staff with methodological and practical support to undertake the evaluation of and use the data (locally and more widely within the institution) is also recommended.

8. Draw on organisational learning to embed, sustain and enhance the student experience and outcomes

Colleagues from participating institutions identified numerous ways in which participating in *What Works?2* has been valuable to them in relation to organisational learning and embedding change. In particular, the following types of sustainable outcomes are noted:

- Continuation and embedding of specific interventions in the academic areas where they were developed;
- Extending the direct learning from *What Works?2* to other parts of the institution through replication of the *What Works?2* model and specific interventions;
- Wider learning and staff capacity development that contributes to and informs further institutional development and research.

Continuing and embedding interventions

What Works?2 provided the opportunity to develop, pilot and refine interventions, and to evaluate their impact on the student experience and student outcomes. The annual reporting and 'action research' model of evaluation embedded into the programme has encouraged teams to uncover, review and revise their interventions to develop more effective approaches to engaging students and enhancing their belonging, retention and success. Subsequently, the majority of these interventions have become embedded into these academic areas.

Transferring learning from *What Works?2* interventions and processes

Extending the learning to other parts of the institution included specific interventions and the *What Works?2* model of working. The *What Works?2* process of working has proved to be an attractive change model in some institutions, and other discipline teams have opted to use the same approach to develop their own interventions to improve student retention and success.

Other institutions have been able to roll out successful interventions to other parts of the institution. For example, the inclusive assessment approach developed and piloted by three course teams at UOW is being implemented across each of the participating faculties in their other courses. In the School of Media at BCU, Graduate Student Success Advisers (GSSAs) were recent graduates employed to build a bridge between students and staff to improve student retention and create a sense of community – this had a significant impact in its first year of operation, resulting in a 7% increase in student retention on Media courses (19 students). This has encouraged other schools to employ GSSAs. At STU, a new institutional approach to personal tutoring has been implemented, informed by the work that was developed and piloted by one discipline team.

Wider institutional development

In many institutions there was wider capacity development as a result of individuals, teams and institutions participating in *What Works?2*, which has and is continuing to contribute to wider institutional development. In short, the value of *What Works?2* is much greater than the sum of its parts, and the implications are potentially far reaching and long lasting. They include:

- Learning from the interventions to inform wider policies and developments;
- Developing staff and institutional capacity to implement change;
- Informing future research and funding opportunities.

The learning has informed curriculum development, student-centred policies and other aspects of the institution that contribute to the student experience. For example:

- UU synthesised the learning from across its core and disciplinary teams, using this to inform its learning and teaching strategy, and to develop a framework to inform curriculum and student engagement development across the institution.
- UOS has developed an inclusive curriculum pilot project drawing on the principles from *What Works?2*, which is subsequently to be rolled out across the institution.

A significant outcome has been the development of staff capacity, including knowledge about student retention and success, and skills and capabilities for managing and implementing change. This has enabled staff to continue developing the student experience in their academic areas, and to be a reference point and resource for others in their academic area, the wider institution and other higher education providers.

An additional wider benefit of participating in *What Works?2* has been further research and funding opportunities. GCU identified that a number of pieces of additional research will be undertaken in the schools as a consequence of participating in this programme. NUB used its learning from *What Works?2* to inform its bid to the HEA's Strategic Excellence Initiative for vice-chancellors or principals, and secured funding to undertake student partnership projects to enhance retention, progression and achievement.

A number of factors appear to have contributed to sustainable outcomes:

- Taking an evidence-informed approach, drawing on *What Works?1*;
- Extending the timeframe during which not everything is expected to work;
- Facilitating institutional teams to have ownership of the interventions and processes, and develop their knowledge and capacity by ‘doing change’;
- Integrating a mixed-methods evaluation approach into the process and using evaluative evidence formatively to improve interventions;
- Providing opportunities for reflection and learning, through meetings and annual reporting in particular;
- Connecting local work to wider institutional priorities and agendas to enable broader engagement with the outcomes and adoption of processes, interventions, capacity and other opportunities.

Summary and recommendation (9)

Participating in *What Works?2* has delivered sustainable outcomes for individuals, disciplines and institutions. These are grouped into three categories: continuing and embedding specific interventions in the academic areas where they were developed; extending learning from *What Works?2* to other parts of the institution through replication of the *What Works?2* process of change and the roll-out of specific interventions; and wider institutional development, including policy development, capacity building to implement and manage change, and further research and funding opportunities. It is recommended that institutions seek to mimic the processes and conditions described here to implement change to facilitate sustainable development and impact.



9. Learning from the programme: Recommendations about how to implement effective change in a complex institution

- *What Works?2* has contributed to understanding about effective interventions and the process of change.
- Understanding about retention and success in the UK has matured through the *What Works?* programmes.
- ‘Third generation’ retention and success requires a whole-institution approach.
- Recommendations are made to institutions, policy makers and sector-wide bodies.

Overview of learning from *What Works?2*

The learning from *What Works?2* about implementing effective change is summarised in this section of the report. This combines the learning from the previous sections and is reflected in the recommendations of institutions.

New insights about student retention and success

The findings from this study point towards the importance of a whole-institution approach to improving student retention and success, rather than something done by academic departments, student services or another part of the institution in isolation. It requires:

- Leadership at all levels, and staff in all roles across the institution;
- A culture that values and prioritises success;
- Policies that prioritise and foster success;
- Systems and processes that enable everyone to work towards success;
- Student involvement in the process of change;
- Data and evidence that inform success;
- Academic support and regulatory practices that nurture success.

The *What Works?* programmes have moved understanding, policy and practice about retention and success in the UK to a state of increased maturity. The journey of improving student retention and success can be summarised as follows:

1. First-generation retention and success focused on ‘fixing up’ the needs of specific groups of students through additional support services to improve retention (*pre-What Works?*).
2. Second-generation retention and success focused on student engagement and belonging in their academic learning context to improve success (*What Works?1*).
3. Third-generation retention and success focuses on the whole institution working together and using evidence to understand the issues and implement contextually relevant changes across the whole student lifecycle and the entire institution.

At this stage our understanding of the whole-institution approach is greatly enhanced, especially in the many participating institutions where improvements are still being experienced and the legacy of being a *What Works?2* institution continues. There is, however, much to do to ensure that all students and all institutions benefit from this learning.



Recommendations

1. Institutions seeking to develop excellence in learning and teaching and improve the student experience and outcomes should adopt an evidence-informed, **whole-institution approach** to implement change in the context of complexity. The approach should draw upon research evidence from both *What Works?* programmes, an extended change programme, a cross-institutional team involving students taking action, and data, evaluation and feedback.
2. A **mixed methodology evaluation**, informed by a logic chain to map the relationship between interventions and intended outcomes, is essential to driving forward evidence-based interventions to improve student retention and success.
3. Institutional data and qualitative research should be used to **understand the local contexts** before specific interventions are selected. This includes the disciplines, courses and modules with lower than expected rates of success; the characteristics of students or groups who withdraw or who have other 'success issues'; and the specific factors contributing to these outcomes.
4. Develop an **ongoing evidence-informed programme** of interventions tailored to address student retention, drawing on the *What Works?* features of effective practice. There should be an academic purpose to interventions that is explicitly relevant to students. Additionally, interventions should be delivered through the mainstream curriculum to all students, facilitate collaboration between students and staff, and monitor and follow up (as necessary) individual student engagement, satisfaction and success.
5. Check that the **institutional environment is enabling** and implementing institutional-level changes to address any shortcomings with respect to: explicit leadership and management support at all levels; the alignment of institutional policies and procedures; structures to recognise, develop and reward staff engagement; and the provision of data to be used to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success.
6. A process to implement and manage change should be designed and utilised, including: explicit goals and timelines; a **cross-institutional team** (including enthusiastic champions and students) with clear roles; and an emphasis on working in an integrated and collaborative manner. Collaborative working with students in the process of change is essential, as is the fostering of **wider staff engagement**. Managers at all levels need to understand and support the process, and especially the value of working with **students as partners**. Suitable data needs to be available and staff and students need to be supported to discuss and engage with this data to improve student retention and success.

7. **Monitor individual student behaviour, satisfaction and performance**, and intervene if necessary. Select indicators of engagement, performance and satisfaction, and decide how this information will be collated, who will intervene, and how students will be engaged and supported.
8. Adopt a **mixed-methods model of formative evaluation** that is built into the process of change. Provide discipline staff with methodological and practical support to undertake the evaluation and use the data locally and more widely within the institution.
9. Ensure that the institutional processes and conditions facilitate sustainable development and impact.
10. **Policy makers and sector-wide bodies** have a key role to play in: developing and supporting networks for sharing learning about student retention and success; promoting access to standard tools that can help to enhance retention initiatives, frameworks, surveys and impact tools; creating incentives, rewards and recognition to celebrate excellent practice; and championing the value of working with students and student bodies in the planning and delivery of student retention and success. Policy makers and sector-wide bodies can reinforce the key learning from this report and, in particular, encourage:
 - a) Institutions and disciplines wanting to develop excellence in learning, teaching and student outcomes to learn from the experiences of the institutions and disciplines participating in *What Works?2*;
 - b) An evidence-informed approach to planning and implementing change, including understanding the local contexts and a systematic mixed-methods evaluation that identifies the anticipated relationship between interventions and outcomes, and allows for unintended consequences;
 - c) Interventions informed by the features of effective practice identified in this study, and monitoring student engagement to quickly identify potentially at-risk students;
 - d) A planned process for managing change, paying particular attention to wider staff engagement and drawing on students' expertise;
 - e) A whole-institution approach that embeds retention and success at the strategic and operational levels throughout the institution.

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