

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Supporting student success: strategies for institutional change

University of Brighton
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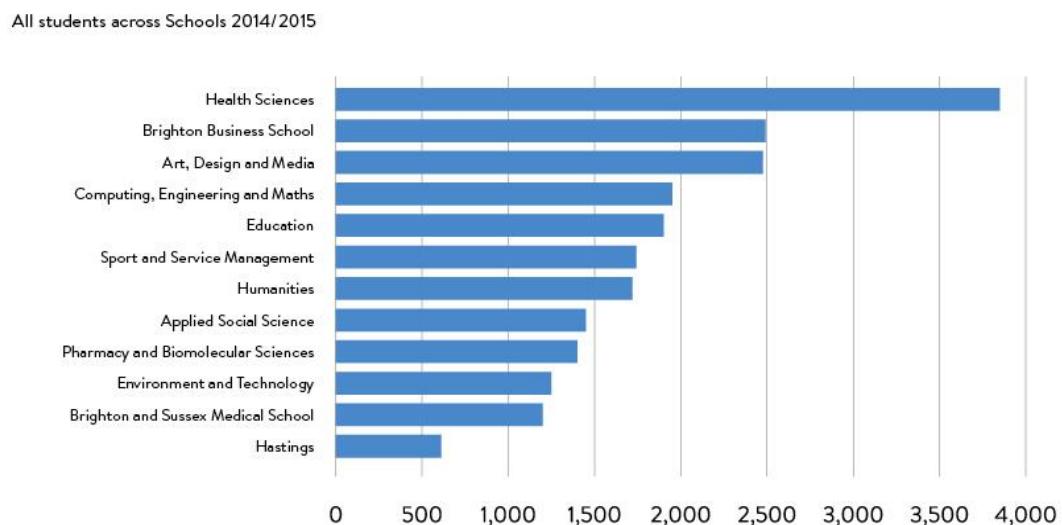
What Works? Student Retention & Success is a Paul Hamlyn Foundation initiative working with the Higher Education Academy, Action on Access and thirteen UK universities.

1. Background: National, Institutional and Discipline Contextual Overview

1.1 National and institutional context

The University of Brighton (UoB) is one of the post-1992 institutions located in the South East of England, spread over 5 campuses at Brighton, Eastbourne and Hastings with a community of nearly 22,000 students and 2,500 staff. The University offers a broad range of subjects at all levels, encompassing a mix of professional, practice-based and traditional academic courses.

Chart 1: Distribution of University of Brighton students across Schools



(University Strategy Consultation 2016-21, Shape and Size, p2)

Table 1: University of Brighton student profile compared to the sector (2014/15)

At Brighton our student profile looks like this, compared to the sector average:

Percentage of total population	Undergraduate (UG)	Postgraduate (PG)	Over 21 on entry	Over 21 on UG entry	Male	Female
University of Brighton	80.4%	19.5%	63%	54.1%	40%	59.9%
Sector	76.5%	23.5%	61.7%	50%	43.9%	56%

Percentage of total population	UK	EU	International	Young FT UG entrants NS-Sec 4-7	Young FT UG entrants from LPN (Polar 3)	UG students in receipt of DSA
University of Brighton	85.8%	6.1%	8%	30.7%	9.7%	9%
Sector	81.0%	5.4%	13.5%	33.5%	11.1%	7.1%

First year student retention and success remains a key challenge across the sector and at Brighton. Reasons for student non-continuation may relate to a range of a number of issues including for example; inadequate prior information about the programme and institution; finance; choice of course; academic challenges; extra-curricular commitments; feeling of belonging to the University; and friendship (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Quinn, Thomas, Slack, Casey, Thexton and Noble, 2005).

Student retention became an issue of increasing importance at Brighton over the last few years. In 2010 through analysis of both internal and external data, the University recognised an increasing trend in non-continuation rates and against benchmark (see Chart 2, p. 7). As such as part of the University's strategy to try to address the issue a cross-institutional Student Retention Improvement Team (SRIT) was established to focus attention and co-ordination of activities across the university on improving student retention and success.

The Higher Education Academy's Phase One What Works? programme (see Thomas 2012) had found that students' development of a strong sense of belonging was crucial in order to enhance first year student success and retention, and that 'belonging' emphasises collectivism, collaboration and social participation as key motivators in students' engagement in this context (Thomas, 2012). Thomas (2012) proposed three interlocking spheres (academic, social and professional services) to instil belonging. The *What Works?* Phase 2 Student retention and success change programme (2013-16), initiated by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and co-ordinated by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) with Action on Access, involved Brighton and 12 other HE institutions (including Salford, Bournemouth, Staffordshire, South Wales, Glasgow and Ulster) across varied disciplines. Further information can be found [here](#) on the HEA website. As one of the participants, Brighton adopted the *What Works?* Phase 1 framework (Thomas 2012) in its aim to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and success during the first year through to completion.

1.2 The *What Works?* Programme at the University of Brighton – the core team and participating disciplines

At Brighton the *What Works?* programme involved both staff and students across the institution, and followed the prescribed model of a core team and three discipline teams. The core team included Rachel Bowden (Head of Institutional Research and Deputy Director of Strategic Planning and Projects Office), Gina Wisker (Head of the Centre for Learning and Teaching), Carol Burns (the then Registrar and Secretary), Sally Boyle (the then Deputy Head of the School of Nursing and Midwifery), Candice Armah (the then President of the Students' Union) and subsequently Jennifer Jones (Research Fellow in the Centre for Learning and Teaching).

The discipline teams were led by the then three course leaders from Business Management (Julie Fowlie), Applied Social Science in Hastings (Marylynn Fylie-Gauld) and Digital Media (Elizabeth Guy). Membership of the disciplinary teams changed throughout the period of the programme and included the following colleagues: Applied Social Science discipline team; Nicola Smith, Lorraine Roberts and Joe Waghorne. The Digital Media team; Stuart Tipping and Katie Piatt. The Business Management team; Tracey Taylor, Carolyn Lewis, Sue Will and Ariel Ahmeti. The model adopted involved the core team meeting regularly together with the Discipline Team leads, who then in turn, met with their teams.

At the start of the *What Works?* Programme the team set out its overarching aim and objective:

"The University aims to develop and build on Student Retention and Success Framework successes within which effective School level practice can thrive and lead to further improvements in student engagement and belonging evidenced through increased continuation and success. This will be achieved through reviewing current strategic strengths and challenges at institutional and discipline levels; continuing consideration of What Works research outcomes, implementation of agreed interventions and evaluation of their effectiveness on student engagement, belonging and success." (University of Brighton, 2012)

2 Changes implemented at institutional level and institutional impact

2.1 Institutional changes and activities

The *What Works?* Student Retention and Success Change programme aimed to include a mix of both institutional level and course-related activities to promote improvement to student non-continuation. The institutional activities that have been developed at the University prior to and throughout the *What Works?* project are listed below. The majority of these activities were initiated and supported by the Student Retention Improvement Team (SRIT) - the roles and responsibilities of which are under review for 2016-17. As the University prepares to launch its new Strategy 2016-21, a revised Group to focus on 'Education and the Student Experience' is likely to be formed to incorporate the work of the SRIT together with new areas of focus.

- The University's Student Retention and Success Framework (SRSF) was further developed.
- An annual staff conference to disseminate and share good practice around improving student retention and success.
- Two KPIs to improve non-continuation included in the Strategic Plan 2012-15.
- Improved information and data on non-continuation: revised student withdrawal data reports developed and disseminated.
- Targets to improve non-continuation included in the institution's OFFA Access Agreements
- Continued support for and work with the Students' Union on improving student engagement
- A new Refreshers Week as part of extended induction programme
- Student Engagement in Quality Policy and a new student communications strategy.

The University's **Student Retention and Success Framework** (a link to the Framework is available [here](#) for University staff) was enhanced and developed and re-launched at the University's annual Student Retention and Success Event 2014. There remains further work

to be carried out to ensure that Schools and course teams are considering all aspects of the Framework when developing and/or reviewing their courses.

A **Student Retention and Success Conference** has been held at the University since 2011, co-ordinated by the Strategic Planning and Projects Office and supported by the SRIT. This annual event has been important in providing a space and an opportunity for relevant staff, both academic and professional services, to meet to share ideas and effective practice in improving student retention and success, and to learn not only from others in the University but also from external experts in the field, including in 2012, Professor Liz Thomas.

Improved access to and more current **data on student non-continuation** was another key objective of our involvement the programme. Attention was focussed on developing a new set of data reports to be made available to Heads of School that highlighted *within* the academic year, the numbers of students who had been recorded as having withdrawn from their course and the University. The aim being to provide more up to date current data than the annual HESA data. The HESA data set are valuable in terms of affording an annual, standard and comparative way of reviewing performance in this area, but the data by its very nature, is limited to providing a retrospective review of what has occurred in the previous year. To be able to provide information on student withdrawal close to the point of the student's withdrawal from the University, an on-line 'Qlikview' application, the [Withdrawal Tracker](#), was developed that course leaders and Heads of School could access at any time, to review how many, on which courses and when any students had formally withdrawn.

However during the last year, it became apparent that the information available from the withdrawal Tracker told us perhaps more about variation in business processes across Schools than actual trends in student withdrawal behaviours within year. As such, whilst the information is still available it remains arguably less useful than it could be until such time that there is a standard and uniform process in place adopted by all Schools for withdrawing and subsequent recording of withdrawn students.

It has also become increasingly more important to recognise that whilst tracking withdrawals in-year can offer more recent and detailed information about non-continuation than historic HESA data, it still provides a retrospective view. New developments across the sector on student engagement or learning analytics offer the possibility of using data on student engagement (e.g. in respect of library or VLE usage) to compare measures of individual student's engagement to those of their cohort. Such an approach could provide a route to predict students at risk of withdrawal and allow specific interventions to support. This is a complex field and the same approaches could also help to better understand the drivers for student degree outcomes, and more broadly as a way to provide students with further feedback on their engagement levels compared to appropriate cohort averages. There are technical and some ethical challenges to this, but several teams in the University (Student Services, with the BI and E-Learning teams in IS) have begun exploratory development work, which will be further developed in 2016-17 academic year.

2.1.1 Institutional impact on retention

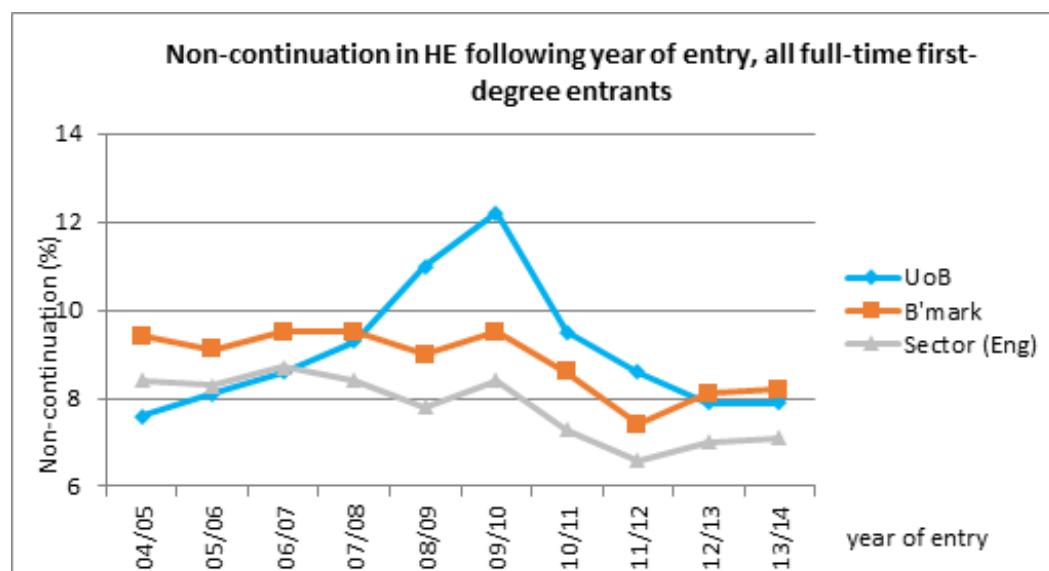
Measuring direct impact of the *What Works?* programme has been a complex and difficult task, as recognised by the PHF/HEA/AonA team. There can be no proven statistical relationship of cause and effect between any institutional and discipline based *What Works?* activities and any subsequent changes in non-continuation data presented since there are many confounding variables that may also be linked to changing retention trends. However, results are presented to show the changing trends in retention and a possible indication that

the University's pedagogic and support practices are helping to contribute to change in this context.

2.2.1 Institutional retention trends, non-continuation and transfers.

Review of the HESA non-continuation performance indicator data (see Chart 2) highlights that the University's performance has been steadily improving over the last four years (from 12.2% to 7.9% in the most recently available data published in March 2016). However the improvements had not been as significant as most other universities in the sector nor against the University benchmark as calculated by HESA, although the most recent data suggest a change in direction on this aspect. For the first time in 2015 performance was below (i.e. positive) benchmark and this has been repeated in the latest update published in 2016 which reports on 2013/14 entrants (the first year of *What Works?* activities).

Chart 2: Non-continuation rate: full-time home first degree entrants and non-continuation following year of entry



Source: HESA non-continuation performance indicators 2005-2016

3 Planning for and implementing change

In 2013/14 the UoB *What Works?* core team identified 3 courses that might benefit from change to try to improve student retention and success. Although a number of other institutional activities played their role as part of an overarching strategy to improve student retention and success (discussed in the previous section) these courses became the main focus of the *What Works?* programme at Brighton.

- **Business Management:** based in the Brighton Business School (BBS) faced some of the most difficult retention challenges. A proportion of Business Management students were recruited through Clearing, which as internal analysis highlighted at the time, suggested an increased likelihood of non-continuation. Although it should

be noted that there have been significant changes in the behaviours of prospective students in clearing over the last few years.

- **Applied Social Science:** is delivered at our campus in Hastings, an area of severe deprivation and poor educational attainment with traditionally low rates of participation in higher education. The course has had issues with student retention, many of whom have widening participation profiles and include a high proportion of mature students many with care responsibilities.
- **Digital Media/Digital Media Development:** is based in our School of Computing, Engineering and Mathematics (SCEM) at Moulsecoomb. The course has suffered with levels of student engagement and non-continuation recently. One critical issue in the broad Computer Science area is both the development of an attractive and relevant portfolio of courses, and the assurance that students have a clear understanding of their course choice and that their curriculum expectations are explored and met.

The aim was to select three courses from a range of University Schools and discipline areas, and which were delivered across more than one of our five campuses. The choice of interventions employed by the three discipline teams were informed by the outcomes of the first national HEA *What Works?* project, discussions with the core team and these were then refined by discussions within the discipline teams. The Students' Union was heavily involved from the outset and this continued for the first two years despite a change in President. However it proved difficult to maintain this level of participation as the project went on over such a period of time.

The model of the *What Works?* change programme was based around the following framework.

- An initial review of the outcomes of the *What Works?* Phase 1 study (Thomas 2012). Including the recommendations that the interventions and approaches should be planned and informed by the following principles:
 - Mainstream
 - Proactive and developmental
 - Relevant
 - Well timed and using appropriate media
 - Collaborative
 - Monitored
- Identification of courses that would benefit from a review of non-continuation issues
- Development and implementation of the 'retention interventions' in one of the three areas proposed by the HEA
- Evaluation, both quantitative and qualitative of the effectiveness and impact of the interventions
- Implementation of the revised interventions
- Further evaluation of the impact and consideration of outcomes.

The model adopted of core and discipline team meetings and updates worked well and one of the Project's case studies focused on some of the unintended consequences that arose as a result of this cross-institutional working group (see Fowlie 2016 Case Study 6).

3.1 Initial changes implemented at discipline level

The three courses in consultation with the core team developed 'retention interventions' focusing on 'induction' and 'active learning and teaching', based on the principles and good practice outlined from the first phase of *What Works?* In 2013/14 these course changes

were therefore implemented to aid first year students' early academic and social engagement, belonging and ownership, and are detailed below and summarised in Table 2.

3.2 Business Management: active learning and teaching

All first year Brighton Business Management students are required to attend a Developing Academic and Employability Skills (DAES) module. The course team decided as part of the 'retention intervention' to introduce some changes to try to encourage students to reflect on their progress during the first stages of their student journey and to do so amongst their personal tutor seminar groups. So in 2013/14, *My Uni Course*, a Studentfolio online based blended learning resource was introduced in the DAES module early in Semester 1.

Students were required to use *My Uni Course* to reflectively record ten milestones relating to key achievements in their first stages of their student journey, and create a final webpage and Personal Development Plan. The milestones related to activities such as: Welcome Week, the Welcome Week Posters Competition, seminars, Team Skills Development Day, assignment feedback, their business idea in the Business Project, the Development Centre, and their Business Project presentation and achievements.

A final year student mentor was also added to the first year *My Uni Course* seminar groups. This was designed to encourage the first year students to engage with others on their course who were further on in their student journey and who would be available to answer any questions or queries.

The intervention aimed to enhance students' belonging and engagement through supporting them to develop: emotional resilience, stronger links with their group and personal tutor, personal development planning skills, evidence of achievement, social knowledge construction and identification of role models. Students were required to submit an assignment summary based on 3 of the milestones and a Personal Development Plan.

3.3 Applied Social Science: extended induction

The 'retention intervention' developed on the Applied Social Science course consisted of a number of different and complementary aspects, including:

Pre-University course: During June, a six day (3 days over 2 weeks) pre-university course was developed and offered, specifically open to non-traditional students, which aimed to introduce prospective students to higher education by providing them with taster sessions, academic assistance and information on the available pastoral support, including the Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT) and the Disability Team. Each day of the course related to a theme involving subject-specific work including academic skills and an introduction to the library and other services. Students undertook an essay which was marked and returned to them in a tutorial session. An additional two day post-clearing event also took place in September.

Student Mentors: an additional and important aspect of the 'retention intervention' was the involvement of other students continuing into Year 2, who would apply to become paid transition mentors to the new first year students and be available to offer peer support throughout their first academic year. This initiative was intended to also boost levels of confidence and engagement of both the student mentors and mentees.

It was anticipated that providing students with a clear idea and some early experiences about the course prior to enrolment, would help students focus on what they really wanted, ease their transition into the University and build a sense of belonging to the course and the University from the outset.

Blended learning resource: KURA, an on-line blended learning resource was introduced in one module in Semester One, aimed to help students engage more fully. Competing claims

upon students' time including caring responsibilities and work were making it difficult for students to fully integrate. The additional resource aimed to allow for an adaptable way of working as well as encouraging friendship, linked directly to retention (Wilcox et al., 2005), providing students with the opportunity to engage with and own their degree. The aim was to create an integrated means for staff and students to perform e-learning tasks built on a flexible platform that allowed for rapid development of dynamic webpages and site structures. It was also designed so that tutors had the ability to readily be able to assess if students were struggling allowing the opportunity for rapid intervention.

3.4 Digital Media/Digital Media Development: extended induction

It was anticipated that an extended induction (to include some pre-entry activities and which would continue until week 6 of semester 1) would help address known problems of early engagement and retention aiming to support students to:

- make informed decisions about whether digital media is 'the right course', to try to address the mismatch between students expectations' and the technical computing foundation of the course;
- engage in learning before they arrive and during the first weeks, in order to successfully survive the learning curve of technical modules such as programming without becoming de-motivated
- prepare for personal changes in the first year and be able to cope.

The induction 'retention intervention' therefore aimed to nurture an early sense of belonging to the course and peer support through an induction process that built from pre-entry activities to mid-semester.

Pre-entry: three online tasks were set from mid-August to September designed to introduce students to each other and staff and prepare for a Welcome Week activity. The computing division designed an engaging pre-entry online learning resource, *Count Down to Uni Challenge*. New students (post acceptance of offer) were emailed by the course leader and invited to complete three tasks/challenges, including creating their own online superhero identity, to familiarise them with aspects of the Digital Media courses, University life, and which also offered a chance to 'meet' online staff and importantly each other. The pre-entry challenges were set through email and based on the module area of 'studentcentral', the student VLE. They were also linked to the next phase of the extended induction intervention, involving preparation for a Welcome Week activity.

Welcome Week: during Welcome Week there was an 'activity day' which all were expected to attend which focussed on the introduction of the tools and requirements of the next phase of the intervention, a 6-week mini project. This would involve group work using MIT App Inventor to make an Android mobile app to support students which formed part of the assessed work for a key first semester module.

6 week group work: the groups formed on the activity day continued to work together to design, produce and promote an Android App for University students. The tasks set were designed to nurture a feeling of belonging to the course and allow early opportunities to get to know other students while working with them and were also mainstream (a key *What Works?* principle), in that they were embedded in the course curriculum and made use of standard University tools. The Groups presented and exhibited their work and were formally assessed.

Table 2: What Works? aims and themes of course retention interventions 2013/14¹

¹ Please see the case studies for full details of interventions for 2013/14.

Business Management: My Uni Course	Applied Social Science - Hastings	Digital Media and Digital Media Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active Learning • Collaborative online learning • Online journal • Learning milestones via 'My UniCourse' • Record of achievement • Peer support • Working relationships with personal and group tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-entry University course in June • Taster sessions • Early introduction to staff and services • Two day September transition event for clearing students • Online collaborative learning for distance learning students • Peer mentoring • Communication with tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-arrival on-line induction tasks • Welcome Week group activity • 6 week group project with early formative assessment • Choosing the right course • Identification with the course • Building peer communities • Communication and working relationships with key staff • Developing understanding of subject specialism • Recognition of course and career options in digital media

The 'retention interventions' as described above and in more detail in some of the case studies, were subject to scrutiny and review via the evaluation process designed into the *What Works?* programme. At Brighton this consisted (in addition to the review via an Engagement and Belonging Survey) of a thorough qualitative research evaluation programme via student and staff focus groups. The findings of which are presented in more detail below in sections 5.3 and 5.4. The project team reviewed the outcomes of the first phase and a number of amendments and improvements based on the findings of the evaluations to the 'retention interventions' were then introduced for the 2014/15 entry cohort. These are summarised in the next section.

3.5 Proposed further discipline based changes to the retention interventions for 2014/15

In 2014/15, the Brighton *What Works?* team implemented further changes informed by the findings from the 2013/14 evaluation (both quantitative and qualitative) (see the two Qualitative Research Evaluation Reports for the full details of the outcomes of the student and staff focus groups; and in addition planned further evaluations of the impact of developed course activities and retention interventions, and student perceptions of learning, teaching and support. Changes to the interventions were implemented as follows.

In Business Management, Based on the first cohort of students' feedback, My Uni Course (Studentfolio) was simplified, requiring students to make just 3 learning journal entries rather than 10 milestones; and these were related more fully to academic course content, which students in the focus groups had reported as being seen to be key and more relevant. Students had to work towards one publishable webpage which would be submitted for assessment. There was a greater emphasis on students' employability, since the webpage could be made available to potential placement/future employers.

In **Digital Media**, the pre-entry activities/challenges were designed to be seen to be even more relevant to the course. Students were contacted by post as well as email to try to ensure early contact with the course leader was initiated. The Welcome Week activity day continued again and included the app design workshop to help foster the building of a peer-learning community and help increase students' confidence by being prepared from the beginning of Semester 1. There was an additional timetabled session with the Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT) to allow students an opportunity to discuss any concerns or issues and to raise awareness of the support available. The 6-week app design project followed during the first semester. Potential group work issues were monitored more closely and team skills were promoted by tutors. Attendance and participation in the group work was to be monitored and referrals made to the SSGT if appropriate. Again, there was a greater focus on students' understanding of future employability.

In **Applied Social Science** there were a number of changes made to the pre-university course, including that it was branded as 'Bridging the Gap' and the timing moved from June to July, to allow prospective students from Access courses to be able to attend. The overall length of the course was also reduced, whilst there was increased support for students' academic skills development, including academic writing. The content of the pre-entry course was amended to reflect the students' comments that those aspects which were found to be most useful were those directly related to the 'academic content' of the course.

The mentor role was also developed for this second cohort which was designed to be both more effective and more 'formal'. The role of mentor was subsumed into one of the second year modules, with timetabled slots between mentor and mentee, training for the mentors was increased, whilst changes were made from a paid role to one that was included as part of the module.

In addition, in response to direct student feedback, resource provision for students was improved, including pre-printed hand-outs for all modules.

Table 3: Disciplinary Interventions for 2014/15²

Business Management: MyUniCourse: Studentfolio	Applied Social Science - Hastings	Digital Media/ Digital Media Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active Learning • Collaborative online learning • Online learning journal • Web-page • Employability • Assessment and feedback • Self-reflection • Peer support • Working relationships with personal and group tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 day pre-entry university courses in July and September • Mentor transition support • Choosing the right course • Being prepared • Building a peer learning community • Academic skills development • Communication with tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-entry on-line induction • Welcome week activity • Mini-project in first semester with formative feedback • Choosing the right course • Being prepared • Building peer communities • Communication and working relationships with key staff • Active participation • Developing team skills

² Please see case studies for full details of interventions for 2014/15.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity • Self-reflection • Employability
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Expected outcomes from the courses' participation in the programme it was expected would include enhanced levels of belonging, confidence and engagement, evidenced by both the quantitative and qualitative evaluation results. In addition, improved student non-continuation rates as measured by both HESA and internal data analysis, could also indicate that the *What Works?* programme may be contributing towards an improvement in student retention (although, as noted, this could not provide evidence of a *direct* causal relationship).

4. Evaluation strategy - quantitative and qualitative research

As part of the *What Works?* programme Brighton conducted an annual evaluation (in both 2013/14 and 2014/15) relating to the first year student experiences of the retention interventions *and* their perceptions of learning, teaching and support. The evaluation comprised both quantitative and qualitative methods. Together they helped to identify strategic factors that contribute to change and issues that need development to support change at the institutional level. However, research and evaluation into student belonging and engagement is highly complex, and this complexity is often reflected by both quantitative and qualitative findings.

The quantitative research evaluation comprised a review of institutional non-continuation data together with the completion of Engagement and Belonging surveys (as developed by Professor Mantz Yorke, see Appendix 1) that measured students' attitudes about their involvement in higher education across all participating universities in the programme. The survey consisted of 16 short statements that students were asked to answer on a 5 point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the question. The questions when analysed were grouped around three measures of; student engagement (e.g. I am motivated towards my studies); self-confidence (e.g. I expect to do well on my programme) and belonging (e.g. I feel at home in this University). The surveys were administered across both entry cohorts in 2013/14 and 2014/15 and at the beginning and end of their first year. The first cohort were also asked to complete the survey again towards the end of their second year of study.

The qualitative research evaluation was designed and delivered at and for Brighton, conducted in 2013/14 and 2014/15 by researchers in the Centre for Learning and Teaching (Jennifer Jones and Rachel Masika). It aimed to gain a deeper understanding of staff and students' views on and experiences of learning, teaching and assessment, and retention interventions applying qualitative methods that have the advantage of generating rich data.

For the qualitative research, an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach was adopted in order to conduct interviews with course staff and focus groups with first year students. AI traditionally involves stakeholders, including students, in the development of their organisation through group discussion. For this study, the researcher posed questions to staff and student participants, focused on beneficial aspects of learning, teaching, support and retention interventions that they experienced. Participants were able build on their positive perceptions and experiences, as a means to explore possibilities in terms of the future development of learning, teaching, support and interventions (Fitzgerald, Murrell and Newman, 2002). AI allows for opportunities for participants to talk about problems. When negative views do emerge during focus groups or interviews they are explored with the objective of eliciting suggestions for positive change and solutions (Bushe, 2007). Boyd and

Bright (2007) suggest that AI research participants, such as UoB students and staff, feel valued and empowered since they are sharing ownership of organisational development. AI was therefore considered an appropriate research approach with which to engage staff and students in the context of this project.

The AI data collection was conducted in 2 phases: focus groups with students in 2013/14 and individual interviews with course staff in 2014/15 during Semester one; and focus groups in 2013/14 and 2014/15 during the second semester adopting semi-structured interviewing and moderating techniques. Rigorous qualitative cross-sectional content data analysis was conducted using a mixture of pre and open coding. Analysis of and findings from focus group/interview data in Semester 1 helped inform the focus group discussion/interview guidelines in Semester 2. Separate focus groups for each discipline were conducted. In 2014/15 in Semester 2 an additional group interview with mentors was conducted for Applied Social Science. The sample overall comprised academic staff, support staff, first year students in the three disciplines and second year mentors in Applied Social Science.³

5. Evaluation Findings and Evidence of Impact

5.1 Trends in continuation, transfers and non-continuation by discipline

The data shown in the table below are taken from the University's student record system and focus on the continuation, transfer and non-continuation rates of entrants from the last three years of study and their enrolment status in the following year of entry.

As noted elsewhere in this Report, the reasons for student non-continuation and withdrawal are complex and multi-faceted and as the *What Works?* phase 1 (Thomas, 2012) research highlights there is 'no silver bullet'. As such, it is not possible to claim direct cause and effect between the retention interventions carried out and any resulting changes in non-continuation rates by course.

As already seen in Chart 2, the University's non-continuation rate which had been increasing for entrants up to and including those entering in 2009/10, has shown significant improvements over the last four years overall. The table below details this data for the courses included in the *What Works?* programme. The data in the columns for 2013/14 and 2014/15 entrants show the outcomes for those entrants during the two years of the *What Works?* programme.

Table 4: University of Brighton data for 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15 entrants: % and N, continuation, transfer and non-continuation

UoB data	2012/13 entrants and status in 2013/14			2013/14 entrants and status in 2014/15			2014/15 entrants and status in 2015/16		
	Continuation	Transfer	Non-continuation	Continuation	Transfer	Non-continuation	Continuation	Transfer	Non-continuation
Applied Social Science	78%	11%	11%	88%	0%	12%	73%	7%	20%
Applied Social Science	21	3	3	22	0	3	22	2	6
Business Management - combined	65%	24%	11%	62%	30%	8%	62%	27%	11%
Business Management - combined	176	66	30	99	47	13	114	49	20
Digital Media/Digital Media Development	67%	13%	21%	70%	4%	26%	59%	19%	22%
Digital Media/Digital Media Development	16	3	5	16	1	6	16	5	6

Source: SITS 2016

Applied Social Science - Hastings

The data for Applied Social Science course reveal that for the 2013/14 entrants (the first cohort of the programme) the non-continuation rate remained similar to the previous year

³ For further details of the qualitative research please see the detailed qualitative reports.

(11% and 12%), however there was an increase to 20% for the most recent year of entry (2014/15 entrants). It is important to note that small numbers of students on this course can cause large fluctuations in overall % rates.

Digital Media/Development

The data for the two Digital Media courses showed a small increase in non-continuation (26%) for the 2013/14 entrants compared to the previous year (21%), although again it should be noted that there are small numbers, even on the combined two courses. For 2014/15 entrants the non-continuation rate fell again alongside a high internal transfer rate.

Business Management

Understanding the data on the range of Business Management courses is more complex, as entrants enrol on one pathway of the ‘Business Management with ...’ courses and can and do transfer across to a different pathway as they progress through the year. To assist understanding here, all ‘Business Management with ...’ courses have been combined. The data across these courses reveal an overall similar level of non-continuation across the last three years, from 11% for 2012/13 entrants, to 8% for the 13/14 entrants and back to 11% for 2014/15 entrants.

5.1.1 Student progression and success data

As part of the overall quantitative evaluation framework developed by the PHF/HEA/AonA, Professor Mantz York conducted statistical analysis comparing student success and progression across all the courses included in all the participating HEIs over the three years of the project duration (2012-15). This included a measure of student end of year grades (cohort mean mark) for students in Level 4, Level 5 and Level 6. Yorke’s analysis also assessed progression from Year 1 to Year 2 and Year 2 to Year 3. The results from Brighton were fed into the overall outputs from all the participating institutions to inform the national data set and will be included in the end of project report to be published in 2017 by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the HEA. The outcomes from the calculations of the cohort mean marks are shown below in Table 5.

Table 5: Cohort mean mark for undergraduates in Business Management, Digital Media and Applied Social Science, 2012 to 2014 entry cohort

Cohort mean mark (excluding zeros)					
Programme	Entry Year	L4	L5	L6	
Business-based	2012	57.6 [295]	59.0 [254]	59.4 [139]	99 on placement in Year 3
	2013	57.0 [315]	58.3 [281]		
	2014	56.2 [373]			
Programme	Year	L4	L5	L6	
Digital Media	2012	48.3 [26]	54.7 [20]	54.4 [14]	
	2013	49.3 [22]	54.5 [16]		
	2014	47.0 [25]			
Programme	Year	L4	L5	L6	
Applied Social Studies	2012	50.4 [24]	52.9 [20]	41.7 [17]	
	2013	43.6 [26]	43.1 [20]		

	2014	37.8 [25]		
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5.2 Engagement and Belonging survey

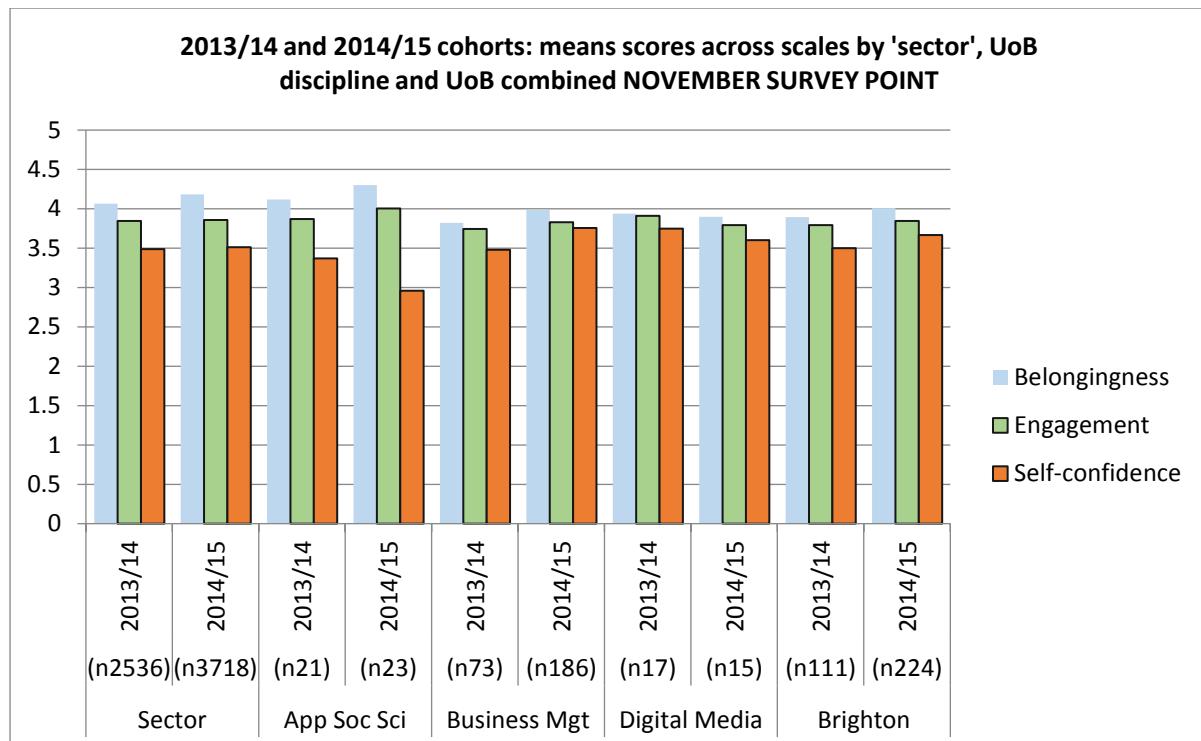
The *What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme* quantitative evaluation (designed by the PHF and the HEA), in addition to the review of student outcomes and institutional data, also comprised a brief Engagement and Belonging student survey developed and analysed by Professor Mantz Yorke that sought to measure students' attitudes about their involvement in higher education. The survey was administered locally to students on those courses involved across all the participating universities in the programme.

The survey was completed at two points in the academic year, November and March, to new entrants on the courses involved in Business Management, Digital Media/Digital Media Development and Applied Social Science (Hastings) for both the 2013/14 cohort and the 2014/15 cohort of entrants.

The results presented here should be treated with some caution due to a number of factors including the small numbers of respondents in some cases, particularly Applied Social Science and Digital Media, in comparison to relatively larger numbers from Business Management. In addition, as already noted, as there are many confounding variables at play, it is not possible to conclude that particular disciplinary retention interventions or practices can be statistically correlated with the survey outcomes, to show cause and effect. Survey results are presented for comparison purposes and may provide an indication that disciplinary practices are helping to contribute towards students' levels of belonging, engagement and confidence. It should also be noted that Charts 4 and 5 present two different cohorts of students, so does not offer a comparison of like with like. However outcomes are presented to show how each cohort responded to the same questions at a similar point in time in their programme.

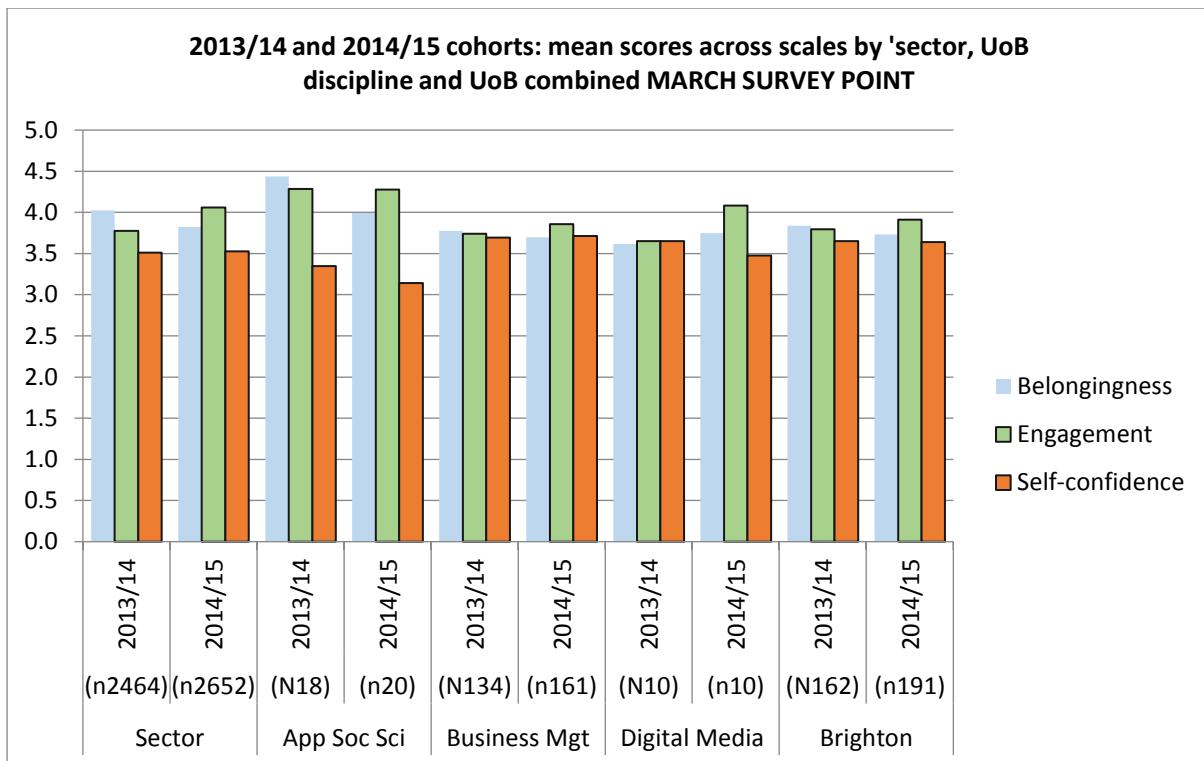
Looking across the two years of the programme, for the November surveys, the 2014/15 Brighton respondents' average scores for belongingness, engagement and self-confidence were all higher compared to those reported by the 2013/14 cohort.

Chart 4: Cohort 1 First year 2013/14 (Nov survey) vs. Cohort 2 First year 2014/15 (Nov survey)



For the March surveys (Chart 5), at Brighton, student engagement average scores were higher in 2014/15 than in 2013/14, average scores for self-confidence were at an approximate similar level whilst scores for belongingness were slightly lower than in 2013/14. This pattern is also comparable to the 'sector' (that is all the HEIs involved in the programme) average results.

Chart 5: Cohort 1 First year 2013/14 (March survey) vs. Cohort 2 First year 2014/15 (March survey)



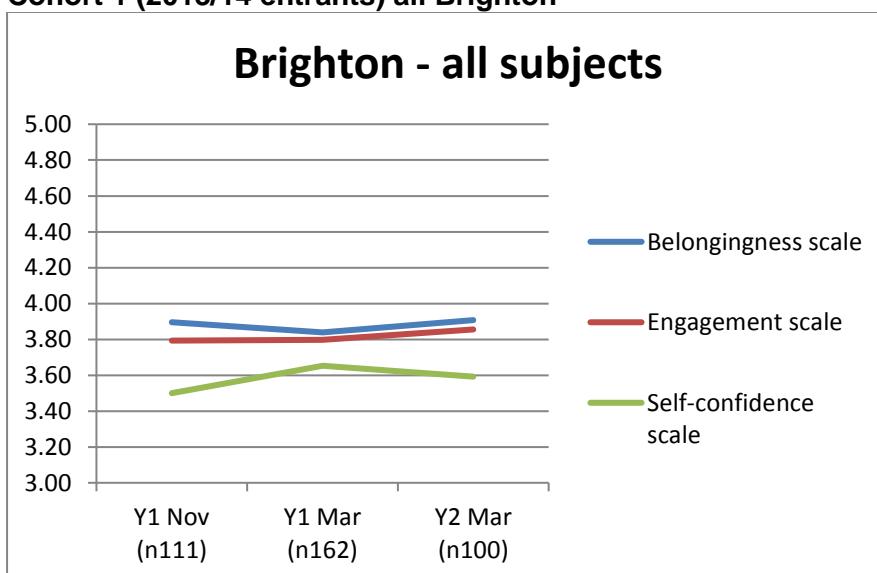
Outcomes over time for the 2013/14 entrants – cohort 1

The 2013/14 entrants (cohort 1) completed the Engagement and Belonging survey at three points during the programme.

- 2013/14 entrants – November 2013 (Year1)
- 2013/14 entrants – March 2014 (Year 1)
- 2013/14 entrants – March 2015 (Year 2)

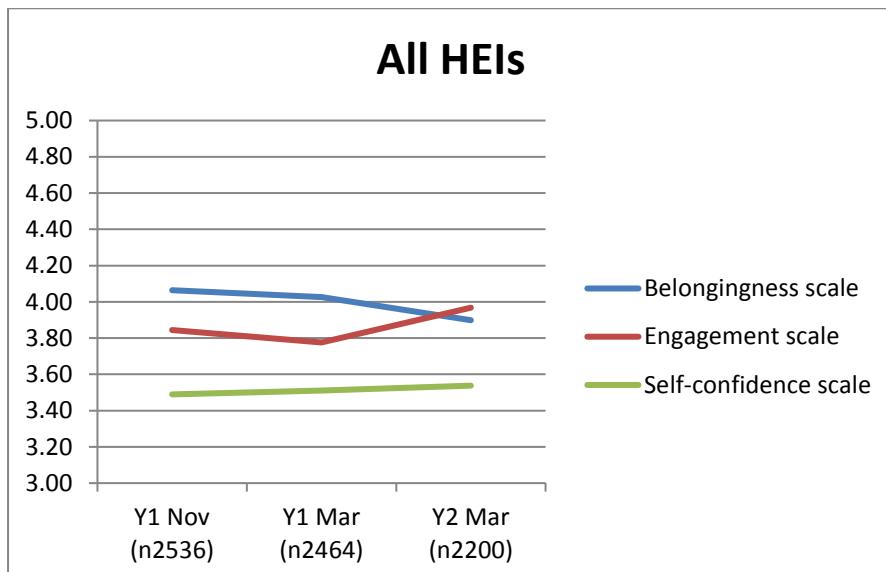
The survey results across the three scales of belongingness, engagement and self-confidence for this cohort over time are presented below in the charts for all Brighton students and all the students in all the HEIs in the programme.

Cohort 1 (2013/14 entrants) all Brighton



The outcomes across the programme for Brighton revealed some similarities across the 'engagement' scale, and overall on the self-confidence scale but with differences on the final trajectory of the belongingness scale, when compared to the outcomes of all the students /HEIs involved in the programme.

Cohort 1 (2013/14 entrants) all HEIs



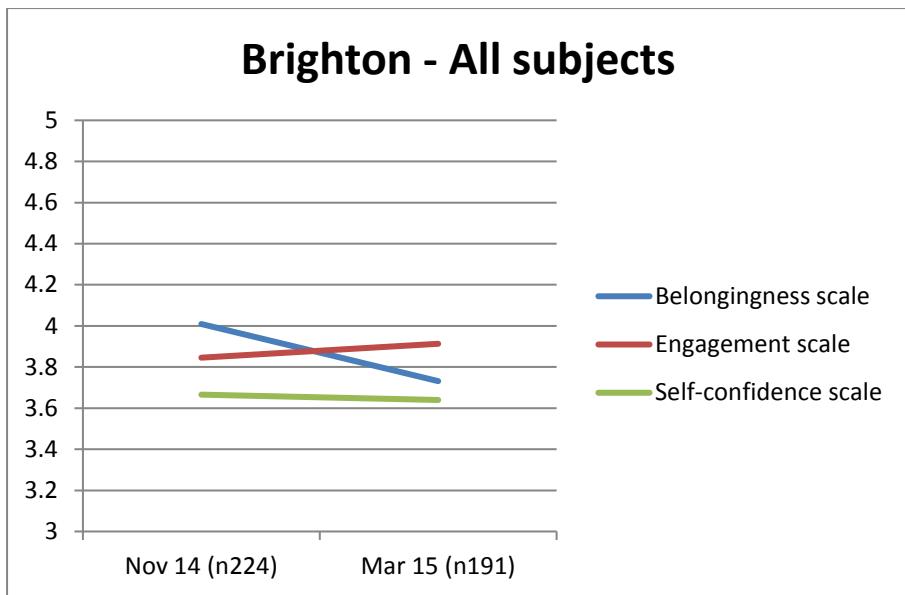
Outcomes over time for the 2014/15 entrants – cohort 2

The 2014/15 entrants (cohort 2) completed the Engagement and Belonging survey across two points during the programme, towards the beginning and the end of their first year.

- 2014/15 entrants – November 2014 (Year1)
- 2014/15 entrants – March 2015 (Year 1)

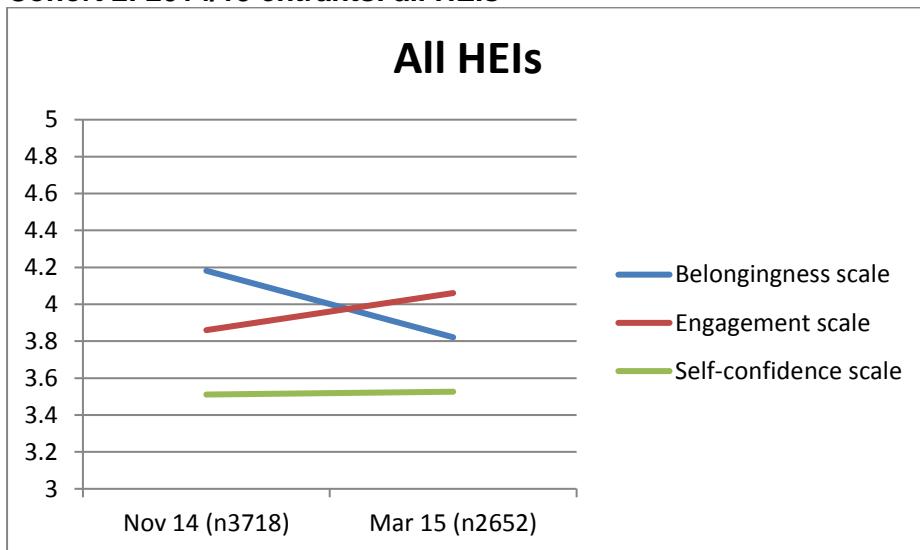
The results for this cohort over the project are presented below for all Brighton involved students and all the HEIs involved in *What Works?*

Cohort 2: 2014/15 entrants: all Brighton



The outcomes for Brighton were remarkably similar to all the HEIs in the programme for the second cohort of entrants, with levels of reported self-confidence remaining relatively stable, levels of engagement improving slightly, whilst reported feelings of belonging declining over the period.

Cohort 2: 2014/15 entrants: all HEIs



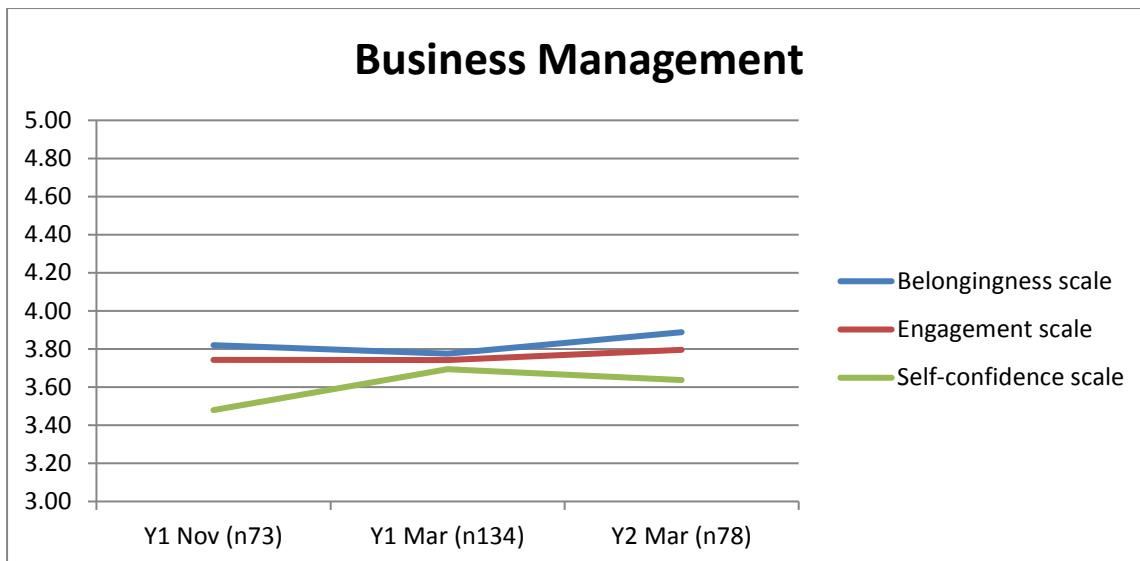
Engagement and Belonging Survey outcomes: by discipline

Business Management

The Business Management cohort was the largest of the three disciplines from Brighton and as such make up a significant proportion of the overall Brighton results, which should be considered when reviewing the all Brighton survey outcomes.

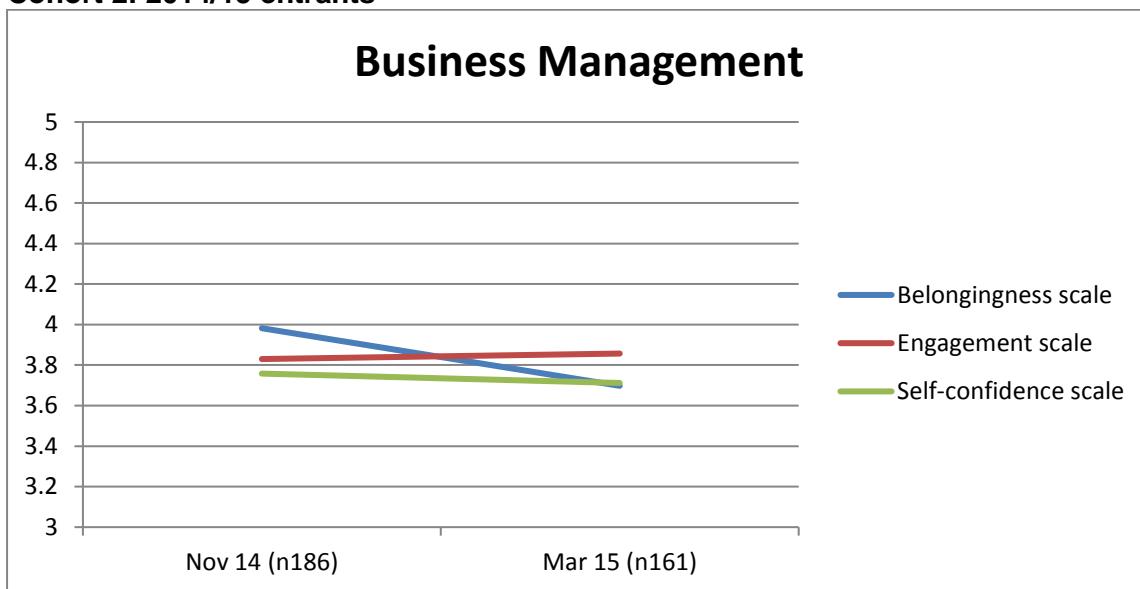
For the 2013/14 cohort, scores on the self-confidence scale increased from the beginning to the end of year 1, whilst reported levels of belonging and engagement which remained relatively unchanged throughout the first year, increased over time into their second year.

Cohort 1: 2013/14 entrants



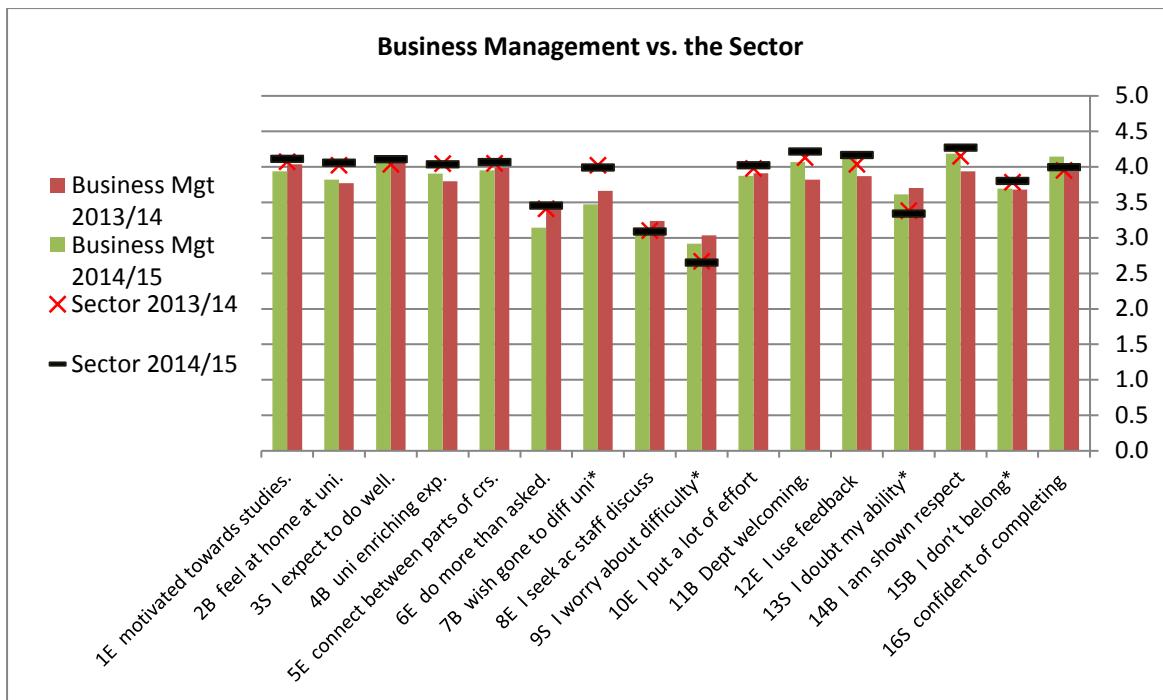
The patterns for the second cohort entering in 2014/15 who were surveyed at two points only in their first year revealed that whilst reported levels of self-confidence and engagement levels were maintained, overall levels of belongingness decreased.

Cohort 2: 2014/15 entrants



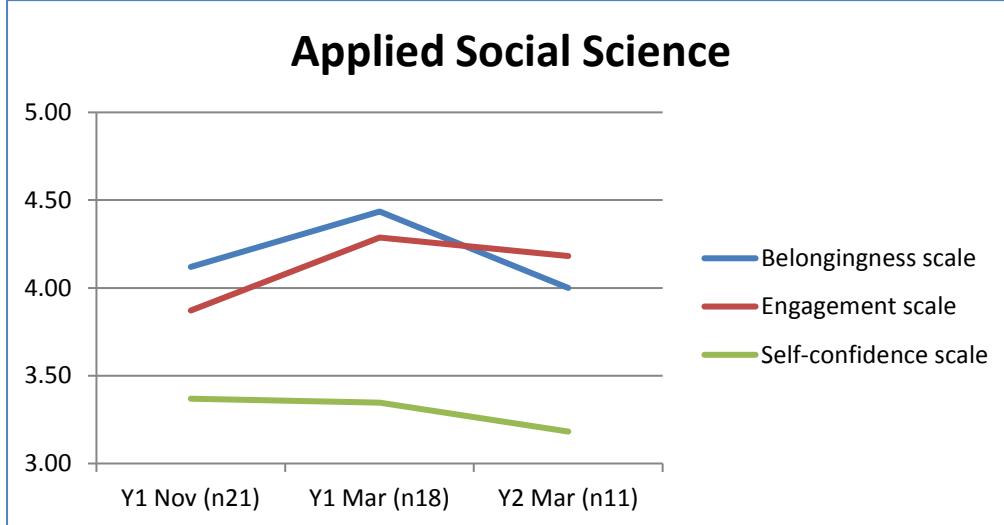
In Business Management, for the March survey average scores in 2014/15 are higher than 2013/14 in several variables including: feeling at home in university, finding university an enriching experience, finding the department welcoming, using feedback, being shown respect, feeling confident of completing. In 2014/15 average scores for feeling confident of completing are above the sector average.

Chart 7: 2013/14 and 2014/15 March Survey Scores Summary – Business Management



Applied Social Science (Hastings)

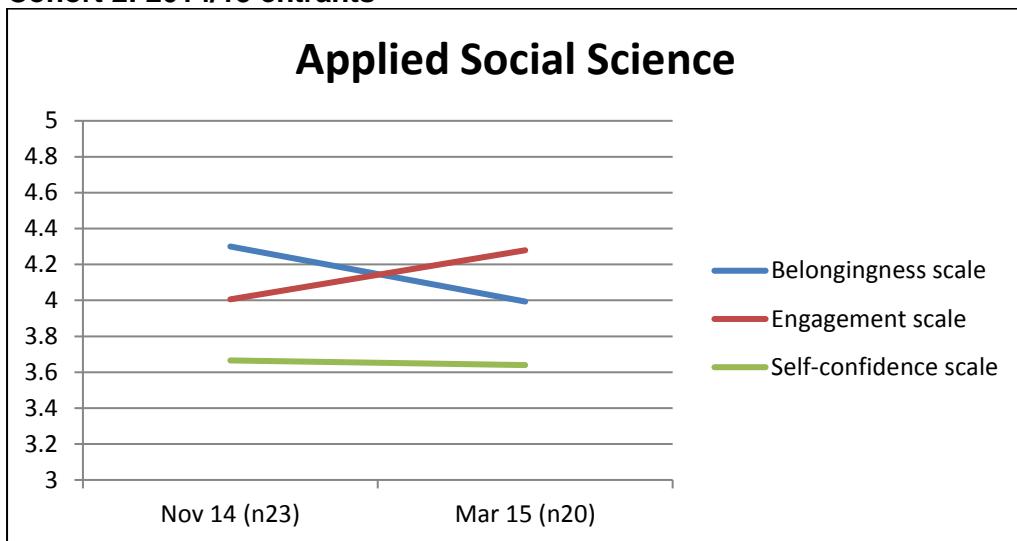
Cohort 1: 2013/14 entrants



The very small cohort size needs to be considered when reviewing the survey outcomes for Applied Social Science. The lower scores on the self-confidence scale continued throughout and in fact declined from year 1 into year 2. Notable were the increases in scores on both the belongingness and engagement scale throughout the first year of study, although these were not maintained at the same level towards the end of their second year.

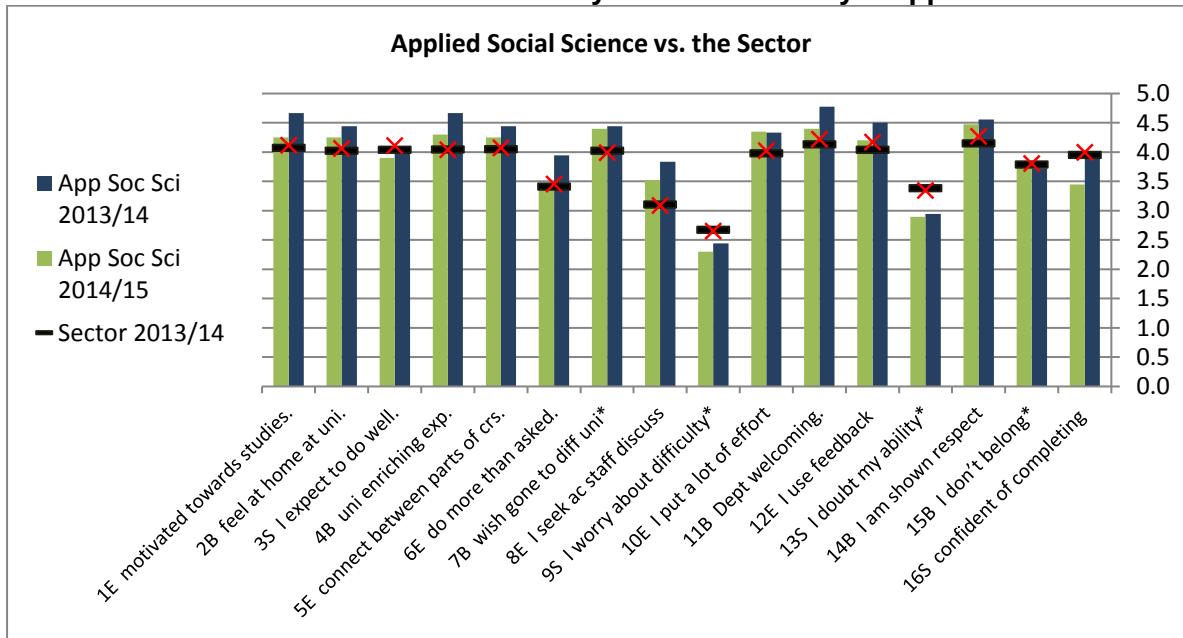
The patterns for the second cohort entering in the second year of the programme are presented below. This cohort was not surveyed in their second year of study so results are only available for the beginning and end of their first year. Levels of self-confidence were maintained throughout, as for the first cohort, levels of engagement increased (again as for the first cohort) however reported feelings of belongingness decreased by the end of the year for this cohort.

Cohort 2: 2014/15 entrants



Looking at the survey results by discipline and the individual variables for the March survey, in Applied Social Science average scores for most aspects of belongingness, engagement and confidence were lower in 2014/15 than in 2013/14. However, it is also apparent that in 2013/14 and 2014/15 respondents' average scores for most individual variables shown in the chart were often higher than the 'sector' average in this discipline.

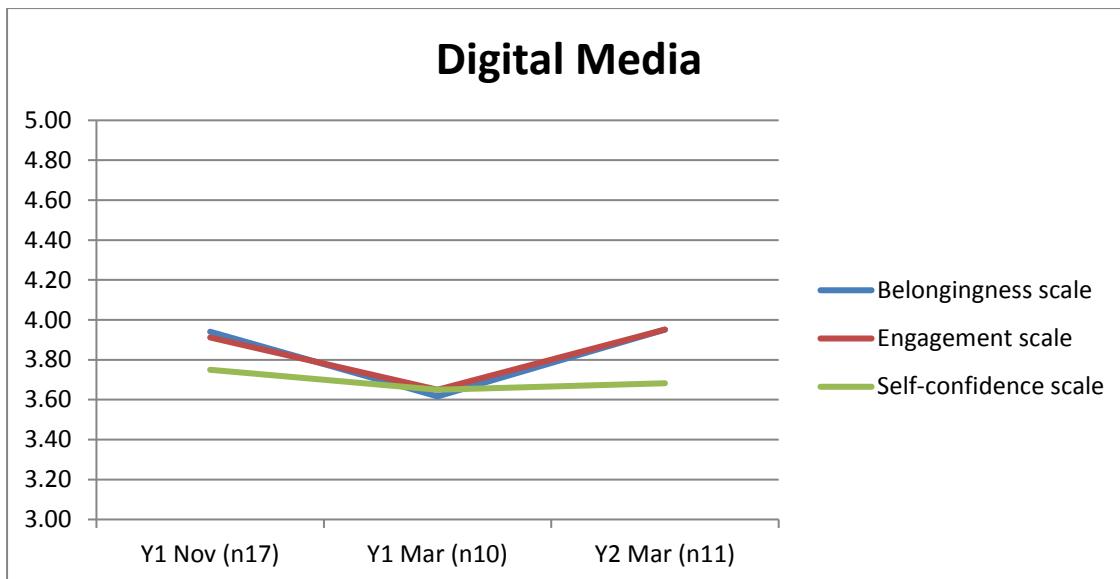
Chart 6: 2013/14 and 2014/15 March Survey Scores Summary – Applied Social Science



Digital Media/Digital Media Development

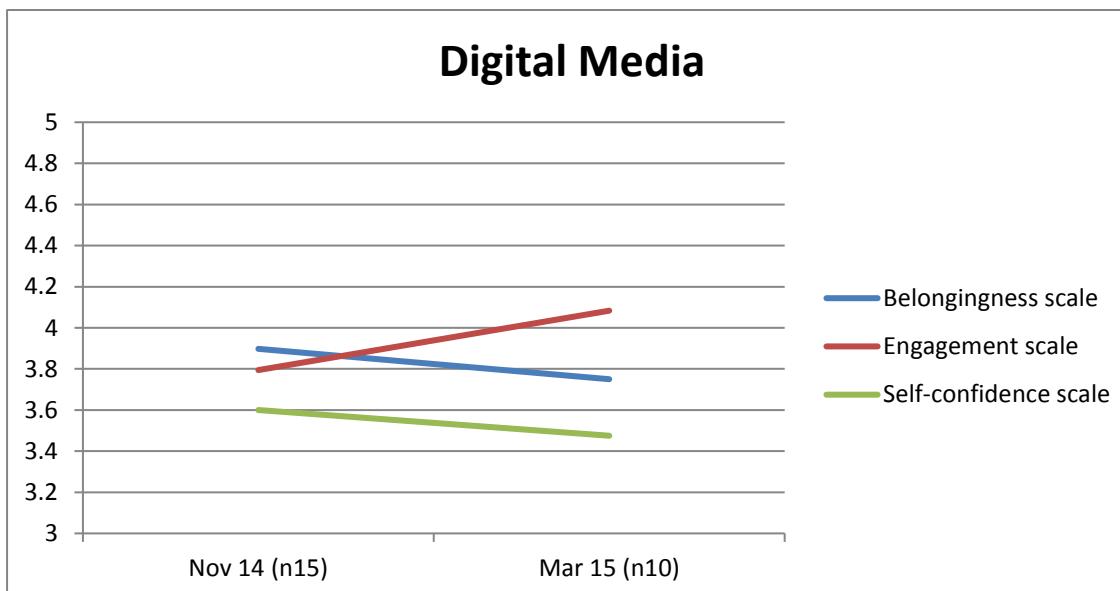
The small cohort size needs to be considered when reviewing the survey outcomes for Digital Media/Development. The mean scores on the self-confidence scale continued to remain relatively constant throughout. Notable were the decreases in scores on both the belongingness and engagement scales from the beginning to the end of the first year of study, although encouragingly, these were both reversed by the end of their second year.

Cohort 1: 2013/14 entrants



The patterns for the second cohort entering in the second year of the programme are also presented below. This cohort was not surveyed in their second year of study so results are only available for the beginning and end of their first year. Lower levels of both self-confidence and belonging were reported towards the end of the year, as for the first cohort, however reported levels of engagement were higher this year.

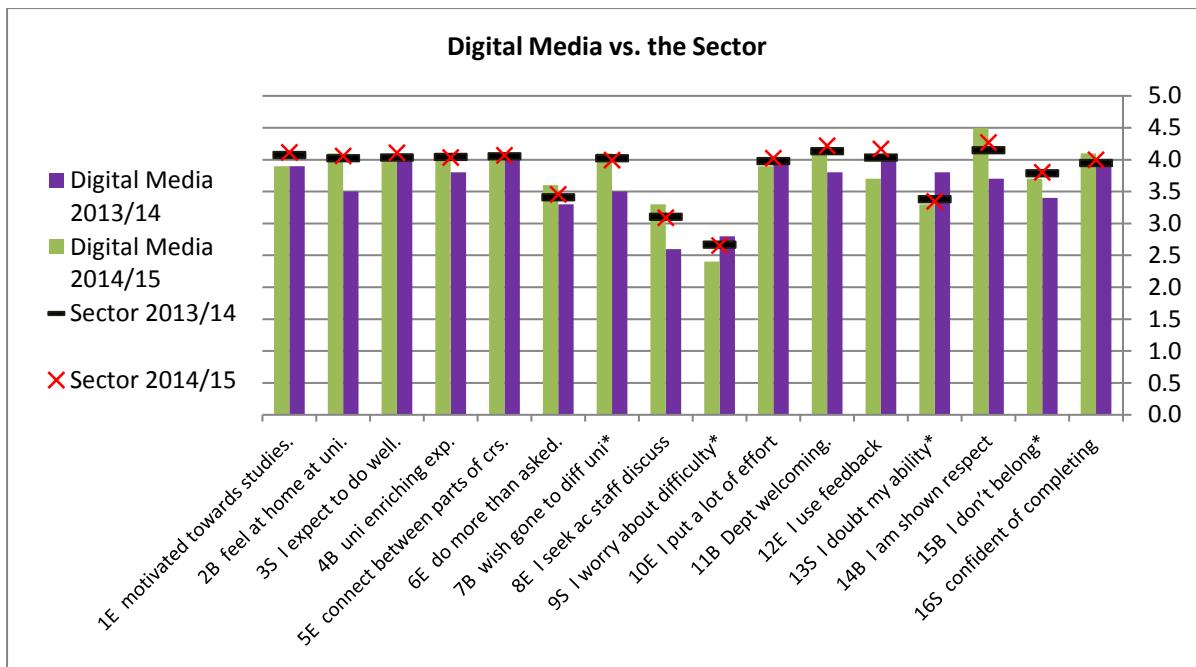
Cohort 2: 2014/15 entrants



This chart presents a comparison of the two different cohorts' outcomes towards the end of each of their first year of study.

In Digital Media, in the March survey average scores for most individual variables are higher in 2014/15 than in 2013/14 and are usually at the same level or slightly higher than the sector.

Chart 8: 2013/14 and 2014/15 March Survey Scores Summary – Digital Media



5.3 Qualitative Evaluation Findings for 2013/14 ⁴

As noted, in addition to the review of institutional student data and survey outcomes, Brighton developed and implemented a comprehensive qualitative evaluation review. This focussed not only on participants' experiences and perceptions of the 'retention interventions' but also on their overall first year experiences of starting their courses. This wider remit was appropriate as there had been a cross-institutional focus to try to enhance student retention and success in addition to the more specific course-related interventions.

The student participants in the qualitative evaluation included (by nature of the activity) mainly motivated and engaged students and this should be taken into account when reading the findings. Together the *What Works?* survey outcomes and the qualitative findings from 2013/14 corroborated the proposition that a sense of belonging is central to student success (Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 2013), and identified ways in which the Brighton disciplinary interventions had been found to be beneficial in terms of enhancing students'

- belonging to the University – feeling welcome and developing a student identity
- belonging to the course - engaging with peer communities of practice
- engagement in learning – interactive, professional and collaborative learning
- developing confidence through achievement and success

(Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 2013; Jones and Masika, 2014)

The 2013/14 findings also suggested ways in which the discipline specific interventions and aspects of teaching, learning, assessment and support might be developed further in order to lead to increased enhancements. In this context, participants expressed mixed feelings regarding the interventions that had been designed to help support their transition into university, where positive experiences generally related to activities which were directly relevant to academic content, such as sample lectures; and less positive experiences related

⁴ Please see the detailed Qualitative Evaluation Outcomes reports for further information.

to activities considered irrelevant to their course. Many participants across groups talked about being overwhelmed by information, the pace of work, and life when starting university.

5.4 Qualitative evaluation findings for 2014/15 compared to 2013/14

5.4.1 Overview of key themes and findings

Building on the findings from the first evaluation, outcomes from the second phase carried out during 2014/15 relate to ways in which good practice in teaching, learning, support and interventions enhance:

- **student belonging to the university:** feeling valued and developing a student identity
- **belonging to the course:** course Communities of Practice
- **confidence:** learning development, resilience and achievement
- **engagement in learning:** interactivity, collaboration and creativity
- **employability:** e-learning, group work and contact with the professional world.

Overall, pedagogic and support practices, and changes to the course related retention interventions across the disciplines appeared more effective than last year in helping to enhance students' sense of belonging, engagement and confidence. However, there were continuing challenges for students, across and within disciplines which will be discussed in greater detail below.

These findings could also be reflected in the November Engagement and Belonging survey results which showed that University of Brighton respondents' (n=224) average scores for 'belongingness', 'engagement' and 'self-confidence' in November 2014/15 were higher than those reported by the first cohort in November 2013/14. (Please see Chart 4). Although of course a direct comparison between the two different cohorts needs to be treated with caution.

5.4.2 Qualitative findings by key theme

Belonging to the University – feeling valued and developing a student identity

The 2014/15 participants across the disciplines often mentioned that students developed a stronger sense of belonging to the University community when they felt valued by the University. In this context, feeling valued by the University was seen as a result of students being treated as individuals, e.g. by receiving personally addressed emails or lecturers knowing their names from the beginning of the course. When academic or support staff were communicative, caring, approachable, encouraging and willing to give up time, then this also translated into students feeling valued by the University. Related to developing student identities, taking on leadership roles such as mentor, course rep, student union employee, student ambassador or group leader helped student participants to feel a part of the University community.

Belonging to the course – Course Communities of Practice

Supported by Wenger's Communities of Practice (CoP) model (2009), across the disciplines, participants articulated many examples of ways in which students had developed a strong sense of belonging to course communities, which also then enhanced their confidence and engagement. Developing a sense of belonging to course communities related to three main sub-themes:

- **Collaborative and interactive learning;** and group work including group assignments⁵, e.g. Team Skills Day in Business Management and group product presentations in Digital Media
- **Sustained emotional and academic support** from the course CoP throughout the academic year that may include: academic staff, personal tutors, Student Support and Guidance Tutors (SSGTs), mentors and peers. Mentors⁶ and peers made a particular difference to student belonging and retention in this context.
- **Visits** to organisations or companies and talks from experts linked to the discipline.

Developing confidence - learning development, achievement and resilience

Themes that emerged as key across the focus groups in making a difference to building student confidence included learning, teaching and assessment practices where students could:

- Develop resilience by overcoming challenges e.g. managing others in group assignments, and managing time effectively
- See relevance of learning to their future lives, aspirations and careers e.g. learning practical and professional skills, developing websites, online portfolios and e-communication skills
- Receive constructive feedback and know how to improve
- Develop learning to achieve the next stage or 'threshold' in their discipline
- Achieve success including: passing exams/assignments, learning new computer software skills, and taking on a leadership role, e.g. being a student rep or ambassador

Enhancing engagement in learning – interactivity, collaboration and creativity

Supporting views of academic staff, the main aspects of learning, teaching, assessment and feedback that emerged as making a difference to student engagement across focus groups included:

- Academic staff attitude to students and teaching style, e.g. lecturers' enthusiasm, expertise and approachability;
- Practical, creative and interactive learning including time for group discussion, e.g. Creative Design Lab in Digital Media that helped students to consolidate theoretical learning;
- Learning activities, assignments and events that relate to students' future and employability including talks from industry experts, visits to local organisations or companies and learning professional skills.

Enhancing employability – e-learning, group work and contact with the professional world

Ways in which different aspects of learning, teaching, assessment and support practices helped to enhance students' employability was an important overarching theme that emerged from student focus groups and staff interviews. Key aspects of such practices related to:

- Group work where students could develop good team, communication, presentation, project management and people management skills;
- E-learning, e.g. creating an online portfolio, webpage or website; and learning to use different software and computer skills e.g. Photoshop, Flash, HTML, programming in Digital Media;
- Talks from industry experts and visits to local organisations and companies.

⁵ Collaborative Learning, group work and employability is another case study.

⁶ A case study of the mentor scheme in Applied Social Science is available.

Course related interventions

a) Pre-entry activities

In Applied Social Science, several students had attended and found the 2 day pre-entry course informative and relevant to their course. This was also useful in breaking the ice and meeting staff and students on the course. In Digital Media, most students in the focus group reported that they did not find the online pre-entry activities relevant or found them difficult because there appeared to be insufficient help or support.

b) Transition events and early induction

Ice-breaking activities were often perceived to be a beneficial way to get to know other students while learning. This helped to enhance belonging and engagement. Examples of good practice include Team Skills Day and the Posters competition and presentation in Business Management. In Digital Media most student participants benefited from the introductions and course outlines, and some felt clear module outlines were more lacking in Semester 2.

c) First semester activities

In Business Management, most student participants felt that group activities and assignments were beneficial for their confidence, learning development and employability. In this context, student participants appreciated the way that tutors allocated students to groups and supervised group work. Other activities that Business Management participants found useful and engaging included: Power Hour every Friday that was helpful in knowing about university events; starting to use Studentfolio and uploading CVs, which would be useful in the future to record and reflect on learning experiences⁷ and for employability.

In Digital Media, most student participants talked about enjoying activities that related to their future careers, for example, learning about new technologies, talks from industry professionals, group projects and collaborative learning including: the New Media Frontier project and creating a website; and learning practical professional skills including: Photoshop, Flash, HTML, web development and programming. Personal tutors were described as very helpful in supporting students academically and emotionally during the first semester.

In Applied Social Science, some student participants spoke of gaining confidence by developing their academic writing skills, for example, an early academic writing activity and constructive feedback and detailed advice on how to write a critical review. The process of students' coping with workload, deadlines and work/life balance challenges was supported by a CoP support network, as mentioned above. In this context, support from peers and mentors was essential in keeping some students motivated and engaged, and helping them through Semester 1. Opportunities to engage with the local community were also helpful in building confidence and motivation.

Research participants' perceived challenges

Across the disciplines staff participants explained that although their practices and interventions were beneficial in helping to engage some students, others were still not motivated, were not attending sessions or events and were difficult to communicate with. Across disciplines and reflected by staff interviews, challenges often mentioned by focus group participants which caused stress included:

⁷ A 'Reflective Learning in Business Management' case study is available.

- Group work: difficulties in managing others, participants not contributing, doing their fair share of work or working at the same pace, cliques and unfair allocation of students to groups
- Keeping up with the fast pace of learning
- Meeting multiple assignment deadlines
- Preparing for exams and finding a quiet space to work or study
- Balancing work and life (particularly in Applied Social Science)
- Managing workload and juggling modules (particularly in Digital Media)
- Managing different computing languages (in Digital Media)

Across focus groups students also described aspects of teaching practices that were demotivating, including:

- Fast pace of teaching that was difficult to keep up with
- Excessive criticism and insufficient encouragement
- Over emphasis on students working on their own in seminars without lecturer's input
- Lack of staff approachability, enthusiasm, expertise or punctuality
- Lecture content appears irrelevant to module outcomes

Research participants' suggestions for further development

Across focus groups and disciplines participants suggested that in order to enhance belonging to a course and university community more academic, practical and/or emotional support could be provided by:

- A formal mentoring or personal tutoring scheme throughout the academic year if not already provided
- More frequent informal meetings with peers on a weekly basis
- Subsidised childcare and support with travel and transport especially for Applied Social Science students in Hastings
- A room where mentors and students could discuss in private particularly in Applied Social Science
- Plain English teaching and learning resources especially for Applied Social Science students in Hastings
- An LGBT student society presence in Hastings

In order to increase confidence and alleviate stress there should be:

- Fairer allocation of students to groups in group assignments and greater supervision from lecturers, e.g. through Basecamp in Business Management
- Grading students' work individually in group work
- Consistent constructive feedback across modules and disciplines
- Staggered assignment deadlines in Semester 1 rather than deadlines being altogether (Digital Media)
- Some tests set as self-study activities or at the end of lectures (Digital Media)
- Computer skills training particularly in Digital Media e.g. Flash, HTML, computing languages for reports
- More frequent weekly academic writing support particularly in Applied Social Science
- Catch up tutors in Business Management

In order to enhance learning and teaching and increase student engagement students suggested:

- More external industry expert speakers giving inspiring and career related lectures or talks
- A system whereby students can make suggestions to teaching staff regarding teaching enhancement

- More interactive seminars, lectures or learning sessions including interesting resources and group discussion

6. Conclusions

6.1 Summary of successes and challenges

As one of a number of institutional participants in the *What Works?* programme, the University of Brighton identified three courses that could benefit from change to improve student retention and success: Business Management, Applied Social Science (Hastings) and Digital Media/Digital Media Development, which became the focus of the *What Works?* programme at the University. In 2013/14 'retention interventions', informed by the outcomes of the *What Works?* Phase 1 programme (Thomas 2012) were developed and implemented to try to aid first year students' early academic and social engagement and belonging.

These were then evaluated to assess effectiveness, further developed and implemented in 2014/15 and then re-evaluated as part of the circular *What Works?* change process. An individual institutional strategy was also adopted to evaluate the effectiveness of the three course interventions; and explore student and staff experiences and perceptions within those courses relating to learning, teaching, assessment and support practices and how these influenced student belonging, confidence and engagement. A longitudinal mixed methods approach (2013 -15) incorporated a student Engagement and Belonging survey led by Professor Mantz Yorke, and a Brighton led Appreciative Inquiry based on focus groups and interviews with course staff and students.

The findings from 2013/14 corroborated Mantz Yorke and Liz Thomas' conceptual argument that a *sense of belonging is central to student success* (Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 2013); and highlighted ways in which interventions and teaching and support practices were beneficial in terms of enhancing students' sense of belonging, engagement and confidence. However, ways in which the discipline specific interventions and pedagogic practices could be developed to further enhance student engagement and success were also identified. As a result, the 'retention interventions' and teaching and support practices in Business Management, Digital Media⁸ and Applied Social Science (Hastings) were further developed in 2014/15 to better support student belonging, confidence and engagement with a greater emphasis on encouraging the development of peer community learning through group activities and assignments, employability and induction that was relevant to the course.

Although the research picture is complex, overall, the 2014/15 evaluation suggested that good practices in teaching, learning and support including course related interventions helped to enhance students' sense of belonging, confidence and engagement across disciplines; and were possibly more effective than the first year. These findings were reflected in the Engagement and Belonging survey results, which showed that University of Brighton respondents' (n=224) average scores for belongingness, engagement and self-confidence in 2014/15 were higher than those reported from the 2013/14 cohort in the November survey. However some of the results also suggest that more needs to be done to focus on maintaining these levels as students' progress through the academic year. Reported levels of 'belongingness' across all Brighton students had declined at the end of their first year for both entry cohorts (comparing March to November survey outcomes). Interventions that focus on activities and practices that promote a sense of belonging need

⁸ A case study of the intervention in Digital Media has been developed.

to be maintained from ‘induction’ at the point of entry and first semester to ‘outduction’ at the end of the academic year.

Continuing student challenges identified by the qualitative research across disciplines often related to: group work and perceived unfairness relating to some participants not contributing or some groups being ‘cliquey’; managing work life balance; meeting deadlines and coping with workload; keeping up with the pace of learning and exam preparation stress; teaching that was insufficiently stimulating, interactive or discursive; and feedback that was not sufficiently constructive. There are many challenges related to enhancing student retention and success that continue to be identified by the University (SRIT, UoB, 2014). In addition, it is important to note that this research may not have captured the views of those students who from the outset were not engaged in learning and did not participate in the research.

6.2 Drawing together qualitative evidence of impact and learning

Practices that were identified by the qualitative research as seeming to make a difference to student belonging, confidence and engagement across the three disciplines are collated in table 7 that may be helpful for staff wishing to consider such practices appropriate in their disciplinary contexts to improve student retention and success.

Table 7: Toolkit for good practice by discipline

Key practices (including induction activities) that made a positive difference to the student experience in 2013/14 & 2014/15	Examples of good practice by discipline ⁹		
	Business Management	Digital Media	Applied Social Science
Practical teaching and learning that relates to real life and future career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talks from industry professionals or experts • Creating a website or webpage • Knowing about future placements • Leadership opportunities: overcoming challenges through managing groups; or being a student rep or ambassador 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talks from professionals in local media industry • Visits to local companies • Talks about new technologies • Knowing about future placements • Creating websites/apps • Learning software skills • Leadership opportunities: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving talks to community • Talks from previous students working in field • Visits to Houses of Parliament and True Crime Museum • Leadership opportunities: overcoming challenges through managing groups; or being

⁹ Some of these examples should be incorporated into the Student Retention and Success Framework.

		overcoming challenges through managing groups; or being a student rep	a student rep, ambassador or mentor
Caring, approachable and encouraging teaching staff who display expertise and passion for their subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing students' names from beginning of year 1 Power Hour – staff are available to answer questions and tell students about university support and events Staff giving up time to support students and answer questions face to face or by email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff giving up time to support students and answer questions face to face or by email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff giving up time to support students and answer questions face to face or by email
Detailed early constructive feedback and providing clear and detailed expectations regarding assignments and module outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Double Dip Learning where students receive feedback and redo work according to feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detailed explanation during first week of academic expectations regarding modules and module outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-entry taster days Early feedback on a piece of writing at the beginning of Semester 1, so that students know what stage they are at and how to improve. Detailed explanation and breakdown of how to write a critical review
Collaborative teaching and learning, group assignments and activities providing opportunities for discussion, teamwork, sharing ideas, creativity, leadership and joint problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team Skills Day Posters' competition and presentation Formal group assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group product presentations – the experience of making a pitch Creative Design Lab including some teaching time and some discussion time Formal group assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group presentations Formal group assignments
E-learning including online communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Studentfolio:MyUniCourse - used to upload student CVs by Christmas and reflect on learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating websites and webpages including online portfolios 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kura in 2013/14 provided useful and engaging additional resources for

	<p>milestones after Christmas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basecamp – used for students to communicate, upload work, record, manage and reflect on group assignments that staff could oversee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating apps • Learning software including: Flash, Photoshop, HTML, programming 	<p>learning related to the course, enabling more flexible learning for students who were unable to attend lectures</p>
Academic and deep learning skills development including research, reflection, critical thinking, writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability skills module helping students to learn and apply research and academic skills • Student folio assisted the process of reflection (2013/14) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning and mastering different computing languages • Learning and mastering challenging computer skills e.g. HTML 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic writing support sessions and advice/feedback on academic writing helping students to make progress • Developing critical and theoretical thinking skills related to discipline
Emotional and academic support provided by different members of course communities of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer support through social media • Informal meetings with peers • Personal tutors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal tutors • Informal meetings with peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentors' scheme support – drop in sessions throughout academic year • SSGT support • Informal meetings with peers • Communication with peers and mentors through social media

6.3 Conclusions and implications for 2015/16 – sustainable change

The *What Works?* programme has proved an effective process of evidence based development of learning, teaching, support and interventions in order to try to enhance student belonging, confidence and engagement across the three participating courses. Lessons learnt regarding good practice could be applied within the disciplines and may be appropriate to roll-out to other disciplines at the University and in other universities.

Challenges still remain and suggestions for further development are implied to help enhance first year student belonging, engagement and retention contextualised within and across disciplines, and in other universities.

What is clear is that the circular change process incorporating Appreciative Inquiry¹⁰ as an action research approach, integral to this programme has been successful, and may be applied as a model of educational development to enhance student engagement within other disciplines and other universities.

Another key way in which this programme has been effective is the way in which this has been co-led by a dedicated cross-institutional staff and student team strongly supported by senior managers including regular meetings and team planning. As one of the case studies highlights, the author concludes that such unintentional benefits of how staff and students worked together as part of the Core Team “positively influenced the intended outcomes” of the *What Works?* programme (Fowlie 2016, p7). This cross-institutional team project management approach may also be seen as a model of good practice.

However, institutional challenges to improve student retention and success remain and it will be important that the outcomes and themes of this programme are reviewed, and other subject areas/courses with challenges in this areas are identified that could benefit from the lessons learnt from participation in this programme.

Ensuring the continued dissemination and discussion of themes and outcomes will be important in assisting this process. One of the challenges going forward was to be how to continue to keep this issue at the top of the institutional agenda, alongside other key areas of institutional priority. However the imminent arrival of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and its focus on teaching quality, the learning environment and student outcomes, will ensure that student retention and success for all students will continue to be critically important and a strong focus of attention. It will be important that lessons learnt are taken forward under the direction of the new University Strategy over the next five years with an enhanced and increased focus of attention on student engagement and success.

6.4 Recommendations for evidence based change across disciplines

Collaborative, interactive and practical teaching and learning Consistent interactive and collaborative teaching across disciplines and modules that provides opportunities for class discussion as well as lecturing helps engage students to understand and consolidate what they are learning.
Approachable and encouraging teaching staff who display expertise and passion for their subject When teaching staff are consistently approachable, encouraging, expert and passionate about their subject this helps to engage students in learning and helps them to feel valued by the University.
Detailed constructive feedback and clear academic expectations Consistently applied detailed timely constructive feedback and clear explanation of academic expectations across disciplines and modules helps to engage students and enhance their confidence.
Group work and collaborative learning providing opportunities for teamwork, sharing ideas, creativity and joint problem solving Fairer allocation of students to groups in group work ensuring an even balance of skills in each group and the possibility of grading students' individual contributions to ensure that they are fairly assessed helps to enhance students' sense of belonging, engagement and confidence.
Emotional and academic support provided by different members of course communities of practice that may include mentors, personal tutors, SSGTs, peers and academic staff

¹⁰ Appreciative Inquiry has been developed into a case study relating to good practice in the evaluation and change process involving stakeholders across the institution.

Increased emotional and academic support throughout the academic year from course communities of practice that may include: peers, mentors, personal tutors/SSGTs and academic staff has been particularly successful in Applied Social Science in Hastings, while a greater need was identified in Business Management and Digital Media. In this context, the Applied Social Science model was identified as good practice that made a difference to student engagement and retention, which may be replicated in other disciplinary contexts across the University.

Relevant induction activities

Pre-entry taster days, transition days, Team Skills days, talks from industry experts, visits to organisations and companies, group competitions and presentations, online portfolios, mentor schemes and personal tutor support made a difference to students' sense of belonging; and enhanced their feelings of confidence, engagement and employability.

7. Outputs

7.1 Case Studies

Although all the practices and recommendations outlined above were shown to be important in enhancing many aspects of student belonging, confidence, engagement and employability, the following were developed into more detailed case studies of lessons learnt, contextualised within the project overall, including challenges and recommendations that have become key outputs for this project. These case studies may be used as examples of practices that may be adopted in additional disciplines throughout the University where considered appropriate.

Project Reports and Case Studies:

- Institutional Report
- Institutional Executive Summary Report
- Case study 1: Liz Guy: A Digital Media Case Study
- Case study 2: Marylynn Fylie-Gauld: The Mentors Scheme in Applied Social Science
- Case study 3: Julie Fowlie: Reflection on learning in Business Management
- Case study 4: Jennie Jones: Employability and Group Work over-arching themes
- Case study 5: Jennie Jones: Appreciative Inquiry
- Case study 6: Julie Fowlie: The *What Works?* Project team: management and experience, some unintended consequences
- Institutional Qualitative Research Report 2013/14
- Institutional Qualitative Research Report 2014/15

7.2 Additional Outputs and Dissemination

Dissemination of the findings of the UoB What Works? Student Retention and Success change Programme continues, both within the University and externally, through a variety of reports, conference presentations and journal articles. These are listed below.

Internal conferences:

- Bowden, R., Fowlie, J., Fylie-Gauld, M., Guy, L., Jones, J. and R. Masika (2014). 'Evaluating the HEA's What Works? Findings: building engagement and belonging

for students' success in three disciplines', Pedagogic Research Conference, University of Brighton, February 2014

- Bowden, R., Fowlie, J., Fylie-Gauld, M., Guy, L., Jones, J., Masika, R. and Wisker, G. (2014). 'Evaluating findings of the HEA's *What Works?* Programme: building engagement and belonging for students' success in three disciplines', Flexible Futures - Learning and Teaching Conference, University of Brighton, July 2014
- Bowden, R. Fowlie, J., Fylie-Gauld, M., Guy, L. Jones, J. and R. Masika (2014). 'Building engagement and belonging for students' success in three disciplines', Student Retention and Success Framework Event, University of Brighton, September 2014
- Bowden, R, Guy, E., Jones, J. And C. Lewis (2015), 'Student Retention and Success: 'What worked' for us and could work for you' Enduring Legacies: Emerging Innovations – Learning and Teaching Conference, University of Brighton, July 2015

External conferences:

- Bowden, R (2014) on behalf of Fowlie, J., Fylie-Gauld, M., Guy, E., Jones, J. and Masika, R.
'Evaluating the HEA's *What Works?* Programme: building engagement and belonging
for student retention and success at the University of Brighton' at the 7thannual UK and Ireland Higher Education Institutional Research Conference, HEIR 2014: From Research to Action, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, 8-9 September.

Publications:

- Jones, J., R. Masika, R. Bowden, J. Fowlie, M. Fylie-Gauld, E. Guy, and Wisker, G. (2016), 'What Works? Students' experiences and perceptions of belonging, confidence and engagement during the first year of their degrees in three disciplines at the University of Brighton', *Flexible Futures*, 2014 Learning and Teaching Conference Post Conference Publication, University of Brighton
- Jones, J. and R. Masika (2014). 'Belong and engaged: first year students' experiences of discipline-focused retention and success interventions', Conference Proceedings Paper, International Consortium for International Development (ICED), Stockholm, June 2014
- Masika, R. and J. Jones (2016). 'Building student belonging and engagement: insights into higher education students' experiences of participating and learning together', *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2

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Appendix 1: Engagement and Belonging Survey

Your involvement in higher education: a short survey

Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Academy are jointly supporting a programme, 'What Works? Student retention and success change programme', aimed at helping students to succeed in higher education. Your university is one of 13 which are participating in the 'What Works?' programme and have been undertaking initiatives which are designed to increase students' chances of success. The 'What Works?' programme is studying the effectiveness of these initiatives across the 13 universities.

The programme runs for three years. At intervals during that time, the 'What Works?' programme is running a short survey tracking some aspects of students' involvement in higher education. This survey is a follow-up to the survey which you may have completed in late 2013.

The survey is anonymous and voluntary. The 'What Works?' programme will be reporting the responses of students as a group studying a particular programme and not as individuals.

The first survey has proved very useful in providing an anonymised initial picture which has been fed back to inform your university. The present survey will give the project team an indication of what, if anything, has changed during the first year. As I said when introducing the first survey, your help will be invaluable in supporting the 'What Works?' programme and student success in general. I hope that you will be willing to help by responding to this second survey.

Thank you.

Professor Mantz Yorke
Social Research Advisor
Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Your involvement in higher education: a short survey

The word 'department' is used in this survey to represent the school, centre or other academic organisational unit in which your programme is located. If your programme runs in more than one department, please respond with respect to the department that is administering this survey.

Please circle the response that most closely represents how you feel. If an item does not align with your experience, please ignore it and move to the next item.

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Tend to Agree; N = Neutral; D = Tend to Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree

1 I am motivated towards my studies.	SA	A	N	D	SD
2 I feel at home in this university.	SA	A	N	D	SD
3 I expect to do well on my programme.	SA	A	N	D	SD
4 Being at this university is an enriching experience.	SA	A	N	D	SD
5 I try to make connections between what I learn from different parts of my programme.	SA	A	N	D	SD
6 I try to do a bit more on the programme than it asks me to.	SA	A	N	D	SD
7 I wish I'd gone to a different university.	SA	A	N	D	SD
8 I seek out academic staff in order to discuss topics relevant to my programme.	SA	A	N	D	SD
9 I worry about the difficulty of my programme.	SA	A	N	D	SD
10 I put a lot of effort into the work I do.	SA	A	N	D	SD
11 I have found this department to be welcoming.	SA	A	N	D	SD
12 I use feedback on my work to help me improve what I do.	SA	A	N	D	SD
13 I doubt my ability to study at university level.	SA	A	N	D	SD
14 I am shown respect by members of staff in this department.	SA	A	N	D	SD
15 Sometimes I feel I don't belong in this university.	SA	A	N	D	SD
16 I'm confident of completing my programme successfully.	SA	A	N	D	SD