

A data-focused approach to personalising central support programmes and complementing personal tutoring (CH)

Solent University is a vocational institution with 10,000 students and has a focus on equality, diversity and inclusivity. The university champions widening participation and to reinforce this in 2016 set up a Student Achievement Team. I was appointed as Student Achievement Manager with a brief to improve retention. Improving retention was relevant to the University's strategic plan 2015-2020 and its Access and Participation plan.

Understanding student retention (A)

My first steps were to understand the retention landscape so I completed a literature review of retention in HE and began investigating the issues specifically relevant to Solent. A key piece of research was *What Works? Student Retention and Success* (Thomas, 2012; 2017). Findings included that 8% of students in UK higher education withdraw during their first year and a third of students consider withdrawing. Another key finding was that developing a sense of 'belonging' where students feel part of their university through the relationships they establish with staff and peers was critical to retention. Research suggested that the most effective way to improve retention is timely identification of problems and swift action (Cole et al, 2015). Initial data analyses at Solent suggested that retention was closely linked to achievement. Academic failure, such as having to repeat a level, often preceded withdrawal. There were groups of students who each year had higher rates of withdrawal and the reasons declared for withdrawing revealed a complex picture of academic concerns, feelings of isolation, worries about achieving future aspirations and poor academic performance together with financial concerns and personal issues. These findings were consistent with sector findings (Foster et al, 2012; Davies and Elias, 2013).

Developing a retention strategy (A)

Retention emerged as a complex, multidimensional problem and therefore I recognised that the strategy would need to be similarly multifaceted. The approach was designed to be proactive and reduce risk, formalising the use of data and developing an overarching perspective focusing on prevention rather than cure. I consulted widely across the university with teaching and professional services staff by attending team meetings and leading discussions about retention resulting in a Retention Framework with four strands of action as follows.

- Developing a suite of live reports to build a picture of three year trends in retention to understand risk factors and profiles of successful students in terms of background characteristics, engagement and entry qualifications. This also allows me to provide data and expertise for personal tutors to inform their retention work.
- Delivering proactive, targeted programmes of support, designed to meet the needs of 'at risk' students (i.e. those groups our data show are at more risk of withdrawing) and working collaboratively with personal tutors to facilitate student success.
- Actively engaging students from the outset and setting high expectations so that they understand their responsibilities. Encouraging a sense of belonging through the meaningful relationships they develop with peers, personal tutors and professional support staff (Tate and Hopkins, 2013; O'Keefe, 2013).
- Organising a cross-university Retention Working Group to gain the overview of retention work, exchange good practice and promote collaborative working. This proved to be key in contributing to the development of a culture of retention and adding value to wider retention and achievement work across the University together with raising the retention agenda as a shared responsibility (Roberts, 2018).

The strategy's success was dependent on its implementation and, as a strategic priority it was championed from the top down with a formal reporting line established. I delivered a programme of activities for staff including sharing good practice workshops such as how to develop a sense of belonging at course level, monthly Twitter discussions and retention conferences. These activities continue and are crucial to maintaining an institutional focus on retention.

Student achievement interventions (A)

The student-facing Achievement Team deliver interventions to support groups of students identified as 'at risk'. These are planned programmes of activities targeted to meet the needs of groups of students with activities throughout the year. Activities include phone calls, individual meetings, seminars, workshops and emails providing information and advice. Each programme provides both generic and personalised support in recognition of both the similar needs of the group and individual circumstances.

Interventions are offered to students repeating modules, resitting assessments, perceived to be 'at risk' by their personal tutors and students returning from a period of suspending their studies. Support is also offered to students in their final year in the form of 'Student Achievement Tutorial' where their individual student record is discussed together with their desired degree outcome and an action plan for the final months of study is agreed. To maximise the effectiveness of an intervention personal tutors need to be involved so they can provide subject specific information and support.

Interventions have proved an effective way of organising support, using resource efficiently and delivering high quality interactions and my team have developed considerable expertise in delivering targeted support. The proactive approach with advisers contacting students was innovative at the outset. Student feedback reveals that students do not always recognise when they could benefit from support and even if they do recognise that they are at a point in their learner journey when they could benefit from personalised advice there are varied reasons why they may not come forward such as being fearful of seeking support or feeling embarrassed. Over time, interventions have evolved, increasingly informed by student feedback. The definition of 'at risk' has broadened and includes 'at a transition point' such as progressing to the next year.

All students may fall into an intervention at some point and students may be contacted under different interventions. Being contacted by the achievement team is the norm and part of the support we offer as a university. The team promote their service at Freshers' Fair, pop up activities and we are present on social media every week to raise our profile.

The 'Academic Referral' intervention involves personal tutors referring students they have any concerns about which is often before engagement data indicates an issue. It is therefore important that personal tutors understand how student services deliver support for learning and how this complements personal tutoring so they can make better judgments about when to refer students resulting in more timely support being accessed.

Personal tutor participation in collaborative meetings is effective and an efficient use of time and avoids the student needing to attend multiple meetings. For example, students whose academic record suggests that they may be on track to achieve a degree without honours are invited to attend a meeting with their personal tutor and an achievement adviser. The personal tutor can offer subject specific advice on building a portfolio of experience to mitigate this outcome and the adviser can explain the academic options available.

More recently supporting student achievement has included developing learning analytics at Solent. A student's personal engagement data can inform a meeting with a student and enhance the quality of support offered (Rienties et al, 2016). I have reconceptualised the retention question from 'Why are they dropping out?' to 'Why are they not achieving?'

Demonstrating impact (A)

At the end of the first year of implementation in 2017, I completed an impact analysis for each intervention, measured by percentage improvement in retention, progression and/or achievement. There was:

- an 11% higher achievement/progression rate for students with refers/defers receiving support compared to those who did not;
- a 9% improvement in achievement/progression of students returning from having suspended their studies;
- a 14% reduction in the withdrawal rate of repeat level students;
- a 3% increase in students achieved a first-class degree;
- a 100% student satisfaction rate for the 'Academic Referral' programme;
- a 12% improvement in the average recorded student attendance.

While it is not possible to prove causality, the 2018 – 2020 impact measures have shown year on year improvements in retention for groups targeted with interventions and in five years the non-continuation rate at Solent has improved so that it is consistently better than our benchmark.

Lessons learnt over five years (A)

During the past five years several features critical to retention success have emerged. There is a danger that by having a Student Achievement Team there can be a perception that retention is being dealt with 'by someone else' when in reality retention is everyone's responsibility and all staff have an important role to play. Crucially, the Student Achievement Team have embedded their role by complementing and enhancing the work of personal tutors.

Fundamental to the success of the strategy was raising the retention agenda. This meant developing an institutional understanding that the quality of teaching, learning and assessment together with support for learning and the overarching student experience will all impact on retention. To make the strategy sustainable I worked collaboratively with other managers to align the retention framework to the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

I have also learnt the importance of critical reflection and continuous improvement including balancing impact with cost effectiveness. If an intervention has resulted in an improvement in retention and achievement for a group of students but has required a disproportionate amount of Adviser resource, this has been reviewed and redressed.

I learnt that embedding interventions and a culture of retention takes time and so each year I maintain the focus on staff development activities. At the same time, aligning change to the institutional context is more successful than approaching retention as an additional task. Data was more powerful than I expected both as a driver for staff to actively engage with the problem and as a tool to enable a small team to have impact on large numbers of students. Being able to explore data is essential to develop a sophisticated picture of retention and by establishing three year trends resource is not wasted actioning 'blips'. My use of data has evolved and impact analyses now include effectiveness by ethnicity and gender, further informing the development of interventions. Data has become an objective and non-judgmental tool for change.

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