

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Summary briefing report: *What works? Student retention and success change programme, December 2013*

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About this summary briefing report

This summary briefing report provides information about the first year of the What works? Student retention and success change programme. It will be of interest to higher education institutions looking to improve student retention and success.

A full copy of the Briefing report is available from www.actiononaccess.org/resouces/reports. For queries about the programme please contact retentionandsuccess@heacademy.ac.uk.

1. Introduction

The Higher Education Academy and Action on Access are pleased to be delivering the *What works? Student retention and success change programme* to 13 higher education institutions on behalf of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. This document is a *summary* of the first briefing report and focuses on emerging findings and lessons for institutions. The full-length briefing report provides:

- An overview of the findings from phase 1 of the programme.
- Summary information about phase 2 of the programme including details about the participating higher education institutions.
- A discussion about institutional commitment to change, and the types of change that are taking place at the institutional level.
- Details about the changes to learning and teaching that are being implemented into specific programmes of study.
- A discussion about the process of change, based on the early experiences of the participating institutions.
- Conclusions about the programme so far, including learning for institutions, policy makers and partners.

2. Strategic enablers: Institutional commitment, priorities and outcomes

Change in higher education institutions requires senior management commitment and support; an enabling policy infrastructure; staff and student engagement; and effective use of evidence and data.

A very positive aspect of the Programme is that the majority of participating institutional teams have secured senior management support for their work.

Participating institutions have located their work within institutional strategies and policies (such as learning, teaching and assessment; student experience; staff reward and recognition; Access Agreement). Many institutions are explicitly drawing together and combining aspects of these strategies as part of their change action plans. Key areas for focus are:

- Staff development
- Curriculum development
- Availability and use of data
- Student engagement

All of these approaches are intended to improve student engagement, belonging, retention and attainment. In addition, institutions have described other outcomes they expect their activities to deliver.

3. Changes to learning and teaching in the disciplines

A central finding of the *What works? Student retention and success programme* (phase 1) was the importance of engagement in the academic sphere. Therefore all the participating institutions have identified at least three discipline areas and programmes to work with, to implement specific change in the areas of induction, active learning or co-curricular interventions (either personal tutoring or peer mentoring). The breakdown of disciplines and themes is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Disciplines and themes

• Induction	• Active learning	• Co-curricular
Built environment x 2 Business Management Criminology Drama Education Law Life Sciences Management Media x 2 Radiography Social Sciences Sports Science x2	Built environment Business Management Computer Science x 2 Creative Technologies Engineering Life Sciences Media Sports Science Textile and Design Working with Children, Young People and Families	Business x 2 Combined studies Education Engineering x 3 Life Sciences Media Music Music technology x 2 Occupational Therapy Psychology Radiography Sports Science Theatre Working with Children, Young People and Families
15	11	18

4. Process of change

A challenge for all change programmes working across an institution is how to actively involve all the relevant parties. Here we identify the ways in which core teams are working with discipline teams:

Table 2: Approaches for working with discipline teams

Clear role and communication strategy	Provision of support	Collaborative working and sharing and good practice	Using data
Designated a particular member of the core team to be the link person with each discipline team.	Played a trouble-shooting role.	Workshop to engage staff, exchange ideas and generate plans.	Use of institutional data to identify specific programme teams to work with.
Student representative working with each discipline team.	Provided the discipline teams with reflective feedback from the core team.	Used the programme reporting template to engage discipline team and develop action and evaluation plans.	Explored alternative ways of presenting granular data to discipline teams.
Scheduled regular meetings between core team and discipline teams.	Mentors for discipline teams	Celebrated the success of individuals and teams.	
		Created a virtual space for sharing ideas and resources.	

5. Conclusions

To conclude, we have identified some learning points. These will be explored further throughout the programme.

Learning for institutions

There are potentially many things that institutions might learn from the early stages of this programme.

- Different approaches are emerging with regard to the extent to which change is ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’. Institutions may find it useful to reflect on their own approach, and whether there are any advantages to introducing additional approaches too.
- Two institutions have utilised funding, for example from their Access Agreement or an internal teaching development fund, to support discipline teams to implement activities to improve student engagement. This may be an approach others wish to explore.
- Some institutions have used existing research evidence, while others are generating further evidence through this programme. This can be useful in encouraging others to engage.

- There seem to be particular benefits to having a senior manager actively contributing to the work of the core team, both in terms of efficacy in implementing change, and in connecting the change programme to other priorities in the institution.
- One team identified resistance to centrally orchestrated change; this is likely to be more widespread. This raises issues of how the wider institution can be involved in change from the outset to try to reduce or avoid this issue. One team made use of a stakeholder analysis to support this process.
- Engaging staff across the institution is challenging, particularly if there is more than one site. Electronic solutions, such as SharePoint, can be used to help people feel more engaged and aware of the programme.

Learning for policy makers

At this stage in the programme there are a few issues worth noting:

- Evaluation is challenging for educational programmes, but the mixed methods approach, utilising common and tailored data collection appears to be robust at this stage.
- The importance of research, data and other evidence to inform the process of change should not be underestimated, particularly in academic institutions.
- Staff engagement is an on-going challenge, and this points to the significance of issues relating to staff reward.
- This programme has been used effectively by a number of institutions to contribute to work delivered as part of the Access Agreement (England) or their Outcome Agreement (Scotland).
- There is still a need for a wider debate about the how we define 'student success' and how to address differential attainment between student groups and between institutions.

The full briefing report is available from:

www.actiononaccess.org/resources/reports

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/retention/PHF/retention_and_success_change_programme_2012-2015

Reference

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Available from: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/what-works-student-retention/What_works_final_report