

What Works? Student Retention & Success



Good practice in student retention: an examination of the effects of student integration on non-completion

**Project partners: University of Hull, Newcastle University
and University of Sunderland (Lead institution)**

Final Report, October 2011



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1 Introductory information

1.1 Authors of this report

Project Lead: Anne Boyle, Head of Market Research, University of Sunderland

The report authors are listed here alphabetically by institution.

University of Hull

Simon Allison, Head of Student Support

Kenny Archibald, Research Assistant

Karen Smales, Mature Student Adviser (Project Coordinator for Hull)

Newcastle University

Clare Hopkins, Research Assistant

Lydia Wysocki, Development Officer

University of Sunderland

Anne Boyle, Head of Market Research (Project Lead and Project Coordinator for Sunderland)

Steve Donbavand, Research Assistant

Maggie Stephenson, Associate Dean for Student Experience

1.2 Staff involved in the project

The report authors thank all other staff who were involved in the project.

A number of staff from the University of Hull expressed a wish to remain anonymous. Other staff are listed here alphabetically by institution.

Newcastle University

Sue Gill, Senior Development Officer (Project Coordinator for Newcastle)

Dr. Jarka Glassey, Degree Programme Director, School of Chemical Engineering and Advanced Materials

Dr. Tom Joyce, Reader in Biotribology, School of Mechanical and Systems Engineering

Carol Summerside, Development Officer

University of Sunderland

Bruce Marjoribanks, Faculty of Education and Society

Dr. James Scott, Faculty of Business and Law

Dr. Wendy Thorley, Faculty of Education and Society

Dr. Matt Watson, Faculty of Applied Sciences

Dr. Diane Westwood, Faculty of Applied Sciences

1.3 Definitions of terms used in this report

Terminology	Definition used in this research
Student profile terminology	
local student	<p>A student who has not changed their address to attend university (and lives near the University of Sunderland).</p> <p>This is the University of Sunderland's definition for the purposes of this research.</p>
mature student	<p>An undergraduate student who is over 21 years old at the start of their course. A postgraduate student who is over 25 years old at the start of their course.</p>
engineering student	<p>A student on a BEng or MEng degree programme.</p> <p>This is Newcastle University's definition for the purposes of this research.</p>
part-time student	<p>A student who studies fewer modules simultaneously than a full-time student, with degree programmes typically taking twice as long to complete as their full-time equivalents. Not all part-time programmes are degree programmes: they may include awards at Certificate or Diploma level or accredited Continuing Professional Development courses.</p> <p>This is a definition agreed by the partner institutions for the purposes of this research.</p>
Student tracking terminology based on HEFCE definitions	
completion	<p>Completion is measured against students' study intentions for that year. It measures the number or proportion of students who take but do not necessarily pass the assessment of a stage of their course.</p> <p>This definition refers to how institutions are funded by HEFCE but not to the academic standards of those institutions.</p>
non-continuation	<p>The number or proportion of students who, having started their studies in a given academic year, do not enrol to the successive academic year despite being expected to do so.</p>
progression	<p>A university's measure of the number or proportion of students who complete the requirements of a stage of their course and continue to the next stage of that course.</p> <p>This definition refers to the academic standards of an institution but not to how that institution is funded by HEFCE.</p>
retention	<p>The number or proportion of students who at the end of the academic year are entitled to re-enrol at either the same or subsequent level of study, compared to the number who enrolled at the beginning of that academic year.</p>

University terminology	
course	For the purpose of this report <i>course</i> is used as a general term that includes both degree programmes and programmes of study that lead to other awards. Specific reference is made to degree programmes and to other programmes as appropriate.
faculty	A structure of a university that includes a number of Schools or Departments.
module	A discrete component of a course, with allocated credit values and a defined level.
programme	For the purpose of this report <i>Programme</i> is used when specific reference is made to degree programmes.
school	<p>A subject-related academic unit within a Faculty. For consistency this report refers to Schools, although the three partner universities make different use of the terms School, Department, and Academic Unit.</p> <p>Sections of this report specific to one institution, however, use the terms School, Department or Programme to reflect terminology within each of the three partner institutions.</p>
stage	Each level, usually a full-time year, of an undergraduate degree, which carries a stipulated number of credits.
traditional student	<p>An 18- or 19-year-old student entering undergraduate study directly after A levels.</p> <p>This is a definition agreed by the partner institutions for the purposes of this research, with an acknowledgement that it is a problematic term.</p>

1.4 List of acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

Acronym or abbreviation	Full name
National acronyms	
FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
PHF	Paul Hamlyn Foundation
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
<i>What Works?</i>	What Works? Student retention and success project
Institutional acronyms	
CEAM	Newcastle University's School of Chemical Engineering and Advanced Materials
M&SE	Newcastle University's School of Mechanical and Systems Engineering

1.5 Notes on transcription

All transcriptions of interview and focus group recordings are as the researchers heard participants' speech, with no alteration for grammar or vocabulary.

Convention	Meaning
...	participant's speech tails off
[bold text in square brackets]	Researchers' notes on anything participants did that was non-verbal
[text in square brackets]	Researchers' edit of details for anonymity or to clarify the context of a quote
[...]	Researchers' edit of participant's speech for brevity
<i>italicised text</i>	Emphasis in participant's voice

When appropriate, quotes from students are identified as follows.

Convention	Meaning
respondent	Student involved in a survey
participant	Student involved in an interview or focus group or workshop
f	Female student
m	Male student
l	Local student
ftm	Full-time mature student
ptm	Part-time mature student
fgp	Focus group participant
School or Department	
cs	Childhood Studies
eng	Engineering
t	Tourism
psy	Psychology
Institutions	
H	The University of Hull
N	Newcastle University
S	The University of Sunderland

2 Abstract and Executive Summary

2.1 Abstract

This report is the product of a partnership between the University of Hull, Newcastle University, and the University of Sunderland. We sought to establish the effects of nine distinct initiatives on students' sense of social and academic integration through primary research. The research question underpinning our collaborative study was:

Does a student's sense of integration support their retention?

The research focused on mature students, first year students, part-time students, and local students. Newcastle University focused on the subject area of Engineering, with students from a range of subject areas included in the University of Hull and the University of Sunderland's investigations.

Our interlinked key messages from this research on the effects of student integration on retention were:

- Key message A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community
- Key message B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose
- Key message C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities
- Key message D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum.

Our research findings showed that students expected and focused on academic activities, and activities that combined social opportunities with an academic context, as important in helping them continue with their degree programmes. We also showed that students valued the integration-focused activities evaluated in this research. Evidence from performance management data showed that fewer students withdrew in our evaluation years than in previous years. Based on our findings, we

suggest these integration-focused activities contributed to improved withdrawal rates.

2.2 Executive Summary

This report is the product of a partnership between the University of Hull, Newcastle University, and the University of Sunderland. We used a primarily qualitative methodology to study the effects of nine distinct initiatives on students' sense of social and academic integration. Analyses of retention performance data supported our qualitative findings on the effect of integration on student retention.

The research question underpinning our collaborative study was:

Does a student's sense of integration support their retention?

The research focused on mature students, first year students, part-time students, and local students. Newcastle University focused on the subject area of Engineering, with students from a range of subject areas included in the University of Hull and the University of Sunderland's investigations.

To contextualise the issue of retention, a cross-institution survey at the beginning of our research a third of respondents said they had considered withdrawing during the first year of their current course. Students placed an emphasis on the importance of the *academic experience* of university over the *social experience* of university. The overall message from our research was that:

Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff, and to engage with the curriculum.

This *integration of social and academic elements of university life* is key to the *integration of students into the School, and wider University, community*. We found that supporting students to feel part of their School and wider university community, facilitates the development of both a sense of belonging, and of the relationships with staff and students that become a student's network of support. This shared experience reinforces their academic endeavour, bringing continuity and a sense of involvement and engagement both with fellow students and with the curriculum.

Analyses of HEFCE performance data shows that fewer students withdrew in our evaluation years than in previous years, suggesting that the integration-focused activities in this research contributed to the retention of more students.

Our interlinked key messages from this research on the effects of student integration on retention are:

- Key message A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community
- Key message B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose
- Key message C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities
- Key message D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum.

Taken together, our key messages demonstrate the need for a holistic approach to student engagement. This approach continues throughout a student's university career: from initial outreach and contact, through applications and pre-entry, during induction and initial stages, and beyond.

The three key implications of these findings are:

- Acceptance of the concept that social and academic integration are reliant upon each other for their fullest effect offers the opportunity for comprehensive institutional strategies for retention
- That the provision of School and institutional support and encouragement for the key role played by academic staff in student integration is essential. Academic staff have a key role to play in providing students with a sense of structure within an academic environment in which social interaction with students and staff is facilitated

- Adoption of a student-centred, collaborative team or group approach to learning may require substantial reorganisation of the learning environment including changes in pedagogical practice, assessment and student supervision. This may also require School and institutional support.

We suggest that integration-focused activities can help students integrate with peers on their course, and with their School and university communities. We suggest that students who are both socially and academically integrated are more likely to persist with their courses, and that this in turn may have a positive impact on their retention.

We offer this report as our contribution to the national *What Works? Student retention and success* programme of research.

3 The context of this research

3.1 *What Works?* Programme common paragraph

This report is a project output as part of the *What Works? Student retention and success* programme. This three year evaluative programme has been initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The seven projects in the programme, involving 22 Higher Education Institutions, have been evaluating effective strategies and interventions to ensure high continuation and completion rates. The projects have been working to generate practical outputs including reports that enhance practice and associated toolkits and resources to assist other institutions to learn from their work and improve student retention and success. It is anticipated that the outputs of this programme will be particularly significant in the context of the current changes facing higher education.

3.2 *What Works?* Evaluation topics covered by this project

The target groups of students under investigation by this project were: mature students, first year students, part-time students, and local students.

The subject area under evaluation as part of this project was Engineering (Newcastle University only). As detailed in the body of the report, students from a range of subject areas were included in the University of Hull and the University of Sunderland's investigations.

3.3 Institutional context

This section outlines the institutional context of this research for the three partner institutions together, and then the institutional context of each partner institution in turn.

The three universities became involved in this research as a result of their desire to better understand the reasons for non-continuation or non-completion of specific groups of students within their institutions. As a collaborative partnership there was a shared wish to explore answers to our research question and, through this process, to identify existing or newly-introduced strategies which could increase the sense of academic and social integration amongst those groups of students identified as

being vulnerable to non-continuation from Stage 1 to Stage 2 of their course. It was also hoped that this would lead to an increase in the number of students who were able to persist and ultimately to complete their course successfully.

3.3.1 University of Hull

The focus for the University of Hull (www2.hull.ac.uk) has been upon full-time and part-time mature undergraduate students. The University of Hull is a pre-1992 institution with a strong research focus. It draws a large proportion of its intake from Hull and the surrounding area and continues to expand access for part-time students. In 2007, 30.4% of the University's full-time undergraduate intake and 89.6% of its part-time undergraduate intake was classified as mature. Mature students are a slowly increasing proportion of the University's intake (31.5% in 2009), and the proportion of mature students who graduate also continues to rise. However, the most recent published rate of early departure is 12.8% (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2010). HESA statistics further report that after two years 27.5% of Hull's part-time entrants (all ages) are no longer in Higher Education (HE).

3.3.2 Newcastle University

Newcastle University (www.ncl.ac.uk) is a pre-1992 university with a strong research focus. The involvement of two of Newcastle University's Schools of Engineering in this research stemmed from concern at national rates of non-continuation for Engineering students. HESA statistics for the non-continuation of Engineering students were around 20% for each of the four years prior to the start of this project (2004/05 to 2007/08), with students in their first year of Engineering degree programmes considered particularly vulnerable to non-continuation. These figures were in contrast to Newcastle University's institutional performance within its benchmark of 4.4% in 2007/08, 3.7% in 2008/09, and 3.1% in 2009/10, leading to this project's focus on Engineering students.

3.3.3 University of Sunderland

The University of Sunderland (www.sunderland.ac.uk) has, since its inauguration in 1992, admitted many of its students from Sunderland and the surrounding area. These areas include a relatively large number of widening participation postcodes. Many other admissions come from other areas of the North East of England. In the years immediately prior to the start of the project the proportion of students from the local area attending Sunderland University had increased substantially. In 2006/7

23% of all new young students (first year, age 18 or 19) who withdrew from their course lived at their home in Sunderland and a further 42% of these young students who withdrew were from the wider North East. It was therefore decided to focus on full-time undergraduates who live in or near the city of Sunderland, with local students defined as those who lived in the area and had not changed their address to attend the institution.

Institutional student profiles from HESA data for each of the three partner universities are included as Appendix I.

3.4 The changing context of Higher Education and its potential impact on student integration

Many factors affecting the Higher Education (HE) sector have changed during the course of this research study. The report by Lord Browne published in October 2010 which made recommendations for changes to the funding arrangements for HE in England, as well as the arrangements for student finance, has increased the momentum for change.

Changes within the sector which had previously been taking place in an evolutionary manner have gathered pace to adapt to students' reactions to these changes. Grant allocations to the majority of institutions between now and 2012/13 will be reduced by 12.6% although HEFCE's moderation fund will alleviate the pain of this somewhat. There has also been a cut in the teaching grant by 8.2% in comparison to 2010/11 (Baker, 2011).

Some of the changes currently taking place are fundamental to the operation of universities. They have revived the debate on how to adequately maintain higher educational institutions' (HEIs') dual responsibility of demonstrating excellence in both research and teaching. This again has provoked speculation about the possibility of HEIs moving to focus solely on teaching or, as Grist and Margo (2011) suggest, that Further Education (FE) colleges might become even more prominent in undertaking student teaching linked to degrees conferred by a HEI. A further issue is the potential increase in for-profit private HE (Fearn, 2011) demonstrated by the inauguration of the New College of the Humanities affiliated to the University of London (NCHUM 2011).

These changes have the potential to affect how students engage with the programme in which they are enrolled and with the wider institution. It has been speculated that when fees rise in 2012/13, students will develop a stronger consumer mindset and expectations will increase, changing the focus of their attention to what demonstrates 'value for money' including the number of contact hours with tutors (Docherty, 2011). Future students may also come to see gaining a degree at the end of their course as their right. The NUS/HSBC survey (NUS Connect 2010) found that 65% of students surveyed said they would have 'even higher expectations of their experience at university' as a result of a rise in fees.

Financial issues might also dictate that students will seek to complete their studies in as brief a time as possible, perhaps favouring courses that condense study into two rather than the traditional three or four years. However, research into the cost effectiveness of moving to this accelerated model of provision (HEFCE, 2011) shows that although there is the potential for cost savings at between 71% and 74% of the equivalent three year degree structure, HEFCE's funding strategy underpins this existing structure and may complicate change. At present the accelerated model is in use mainly for vocational subjects and it may not be possible for some types of subjects to be provided in this way. For it to be implemented successfully, HEFCE (2011) suggests that barriers to expansion of existing models are 'partly located within institutional operations systems and cultures, and partly around the niche nature of some of the existing awards' (p.31). Alternative ways of studying for a degree may include extensions of the Open University model, or the use of technologies to support distance learning.

It seems likely that there will be an increasing emphasis on the outcomes of a degree programme in terms of employability. Students may become more acutely aware of potential employers' views of their awarding university's standing and make choices about their applications based on this (Sutton Trust, 2010).

Trials of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), a classificatory system for representing student achievement and educational value added, will take place in twenty seven universities in 2011/12. It is proposed that this new classificatory system will eventually be rolled out to all universities once employers become accustomed to the richer and more detailed information which it proposes. The aim

of this system is to afford employers a deeper appreciation of the attributes of any potential employee. This scrutiny may influence the way students regard their journey through HE towards the outcome of employment (Burgess, 2011). In the short-term there is strong competition for university places in 2011/12 prior to changes in the arrangements for student finance from 2012/13. UCAS reported 669,956 applicants to UK institutions as at 30th June 2011, an increase of 1.4% (over 9,000 applicants) on the previous year.

It is therefore necessary to assume that the academic and social integration of all student groups in our collaborative study will be subject to both the positive and negative effects of all these changes. As both students and universities may feel the need to make decisions based on economic circumstances universities may redouble their efforts to retain students and students may feel a greater necessity to persist with their studies. Students may demand more for their fees and have a keener eye on the outcome of their education in terms of employability. Universities may adjust their curriculum design, pedagogical practices and assessment strategies to keep pace with students' changing priorities in the context of the 2011 Education White Paper. As universities will now have the option of recruiting more students with the highest qualifications, and as students become increasingly selective in their choice of university based on both economic imperatives and the goal of future employment, ensuring that students' sense of academic integration is maintained must become an institutional priority. Students in this study told us that their academic experiences were what they prized most highly. They also revealed the intricate link between academic integration and students' social/relational experiences, and how these supported their desire to persist.

3.5 Student groups involved in this research

This section introduces the groups of students involved in this research. It is first important to note the amount of crossover between our focus sample groups. Some local students were also mature, as were a small proportion (around 8%) of engineering students. Amongst students who were mainly classified as 'traditional', a small proportion also lived at home. Although both Sunderland and Newcastle Universities have large numbers of part-time students these have not been included as a focus within this study. Appendix I presents HESA and HEFCE data showing student numbers and non-continuation rates at an institutional level.

3.5.1 Local students

HEFCE (2009) has reported that the number of young first degree students who live 'at home' (in the home of their parent or guardian) remained around 8% from 1984/85 to 1990/91, then rose to around 20% by 2000/01 and reached a plateau thereafter. In addition, HEFCE observes that students in the North East have a higher rate of living at home than anywhere else in the UK: 35% of young first degree entrants lived at home in the North/North East in 2006/07, compared with 21% as a UK average in that year (HEFCE 2009, p.3). This is even more marked for the University of Sunderland: 54% of young first degree students lived in the home of their parent or guardian in 2006/7, and for students originally domiciled in Sunderland (local students) the figure was 84%, rising to 91% by 2009/10.

Nationally, young first degree students who live at home have a high rate of non-continuation at 10%, which compares with 6% on average for all accommodation types, and only 4% for those who live in institution-maintained accommodation (HEFCE 2009, p.35). At Sunderland, 20% of young Sunderland domiciled students living at home withdrew or didn't progress in 2006/07, although this fell to 15% by 2009/10.

It is dangerous to universally link students who live at home with lower socio-economic circumstances. For example, students from certain ethnic groups, in particular Bangladeshi and Pakistani students, are more likely than other ethnic groups to live at home (HEFCE, 2009). It must however be noted that the link between living at home and lower socio-economic circumstances may be the case for some students.

Research at a national level has shown that the likelihood of those from the lowest participation areas in the UK registering for a degree has increased by fifty per cent in the past 15 years (Pearce, 2011, p95). Furthermore, since the mid-2000s the majority of additional entrants to HE have come from more disadvantaged areas (HEFCE, 2010).

Some groups of students are known to experience concerns about debt. Older students, single parent students, those from lower social classes and those who work during term time are reported as having particular concerns (CHERI, 2005 p.7).

In the wake of the changes in fee levels and funding arrangements this trend may become more pronounced, with a potential risk that:

‘non privileged students will make higher education choices based on cost – or the perception of cost – rather than academic talent, and that leading universities will become the preserve of the well off ‘ (Sutton Trust, 2010 p3).

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA 2011) expects universities which set fee levels of over £6,000 per annum to demonstrate access agreements to safeguard fair access for students from under-represented groups. At the time of writing it is not yet clear what the effect might be of access agreements and how HEIs will implement them.

3.5.2 Part-time students

The experience of part-time students has sometimes been that of peripherality (Koetsier & Walters, 2010; Medhurst, 2008), either because this has been their own preferred position – using the University for the purpose of knowledge acquisition without requiring anything further of it – or because the focus of the institution has been on traditional, full-time, residential students. Under the new funding arrangements students studying a proportion of a full-time course will now be entitled to tuition fee loans. However, as this group of students may also be mature and be balancing study with other commitments, they may also be averse to the prospect of amassing debt. Decisions on the route and duration of study may be significant in the way that part-time students come to relate to their degree programme, perhaps erecting barriers to this group’s true sense of integration with their degree programme. Targeted, refined, institutional approaches that take into account these students’ distinct needs, values and beliefs may be necessary to ensure their ongoing resilience.

3.5.3 Mature students

Mature students as a group represent an increasing proportion of the total student population in England (Pearce, 2011). As with part-time students, the experience of mature students may be driven by a complex network of other factors which means that their age may not be the key influencing factor in their study experience. More significant influences may include caring and financial responsibilities and often a strong sense of determination for successful completion of their course.

3.5.4 Engineering students

As a largely young, mostly male, post-A level entrant group, Engineering students may be less obviously affected by the changes in funding arrangements set out in the Browne Report (2010). The sense of debt burden experienced by this group may be mitigated by being predominantly young, male and in a sector with relatively stable employment prospects. However, the change in funding arrangements in HE might lead to the stratification of students, specifically of students entering highly competitive science courses. The Sutton Trust (2011) has suggested that access to the most selective universities has become more restrictive, with independent school pupils over twenty two times more likely than disadvantaged state school children to gain a place. This inequality appears to be embedded within secondary education and A level preparation: the majority of state schools prepare their students for core science at GCSE, whilst independent schools prepare their students for single science subjects. This raises the possibility of an eventual diminution of diversity within the learning culture.

4 Aims and objectives of evaluation

The research question underpinning our collaborative study was:

Does a student's sense of integration support their retention?

To examine this question, new and existing initiatives at the three partner universities were evaluated. This research sought to establish through mainly qualitative enquiry supported by additional quantitative measures the effect of these initiatives on students' sense of integration, and consequent retention, within each university's previously specified areas of student focus.

In exploring student integration we first consider what the term means. Student integration is generally regarded as having two constituent parts: social and academic. Although widely used, these concepts lack specific definition. Tinto's model (2006) of student retention examined the effect of social and academic student integration, both formal and informal, but refrained from giving an operational definition due to a belief that integration may acquire different meanings in different academic and cultural contexts (Severiens and Wolff, 2008). There has also been a developing understanding of the relationship between the institution and the student. Zepke and Leach (2005) suggested that academic institutions may need to adopt a greater degree of flexibility in embracing the cultures from which students enter the University, rather than expecting students to surrender their pre-student identities in order to become encultured within the institution.

Integration, both academic and social, appears to be interlinked in a complex, recursive way. As Severiens and Schmidt (2009) pointed out:

'those who feel at home, who take part in extra-curricular activities, and who feel connected with fellow students and teachers, are more inclined to persist with their studies. Without social integration, it is more difficult to persist, and ultimately to graduate' (p.60).

The integration strategies implemented within each institution, both existing and newly developed, all focused on bringing together in groups students who were potentially vulnerable to non-continuation, either to work together academically or to link socially. In each case the melding of these two aspects of potential integration

was explored and any resultant impact upon students' perceptions of their sense of belonging was identified, particularly where the number of students persisting with their studies and the impact upon that university's rate of retention could be determined.

5 Details of interventions and practices evaluated

This section gives details of the interventions and practices evaluated, organised by partner institution.

5.1 University of Hull

At the University of Hull two activities aimed specifically at mature full-time and part-time students were evaluated. In addition an enhanced system of supervisor contact within the School of Social Studies was also examined.

5.1.1 Study Skills Summer School

The Study Skills Summer School is a free, two day, non-residential course held on the main Hull campus. It is open to both new and continuing part-time and mature full-time students. It includes a combination of lectures, seminars and practical tasks, and aims to deliver an authentic university experience with a focus on the development of academic study skills. These include sessions focused on critical and analytical thinking, note taking, and essay writing as well as referencing and plagiarism. A shared lunch punctuates each day and aims to provide an environment in which interaction between student peers, and with academic and support staff, can take place.

5.1.2 Mature Student Welcome Lunch

This event has taken place since 2005 on both the Hull and Scarborough campuses in the week prior to registration. Full-time mature students are invited and the aim of the event is "an opportunity to learn more about the University and a chance to meet other new, as well as existing, students" (University of Hull booking leaflet, 2010). Students are allocated places around circular tables according to the programme on which they will be studying. Interaction is encouraged through a quiz about the University for which prizes are awarded. As one participant neatly described it, it is "a social event, but with a purpose".

5.1.3 Supervisor contact arrangements (School of Social Sciences)

An enhanced system of pastoral and academic supervision was introduced into the School in 2009/10. This new system seeks to be a formal supervisory structure that provides support and boundaries, with an opportunity for tutors to keep in touch with students. It also aims to be, as one academic described it, “sociology in practice” by addressing issues of normlessness that Durkheim (1970) described as *anomie*: a personal feeling of mismatch or lack of social norms. In doing so, this system links students together in groups during the earliest stages of induction, and provides the opportunity for students to work together on an introductory task. These initial groups provide the basis of an ongoing tutor group with a shared personal supervisor, who will work together over the first year combining ‘universal’ or core modules with study skills and elements of pastoral care.

5.2 Newcastle University

At Newcastle University two Schools of Engineering introduced initiatives aimed at increasing interaction between students. In the School of Mechanical and Systems Engineering (M&SE) this focused on academic integration and in the School of Chemical Engineering and Advanced Materials (CEAM) the emphasis was on increasing social integration.

5.2.1 The T-shirt exercise

The School of Chemical Engineering and Advanced Materials (CEAM) has traditionally held a welcome reception for all new students in the first week of the first semester. In 2009/10, as a response to increasing numbers of students, the focus of this event was changed to one that stimulated student interaction with peers and academic staff. Everyone present was given a T-shirt and marker pens. Most importantly a clear set of instructions was given to the group: they were required to draw representations of their interests on their T-shirt and then to circulate, find others with similar interests and form a group. Participants were given firm instructions about the mix of gender and ethnicity of each group, and staff actively intervened to move students out of their ‘comfort zones’. Groups formed in this way later worked together on module-specific group assignments.

5.2.2 Engineering Teams

Since 2009/10 all students in Stage 1 of their degree programme in the School of Mechanical and Systems Engineering (M&SE) have been organised into purposively

selected learning teams of five on the first day of semester one. Allocation to Engineering Teams is carried out to ensure that each Team's members have a range of skills and previous academic achievements: no Team consists only of academically high-achieving students or of those with relatively low entry grades. Students joining the course from a Foundation Year and overseas students new to the UK are distributed throughout the Teams. Great care is taken to ensure that female students, who represent a minority group within the School, are in a Team which contains another female student. Wherever possible, consideration is also given to students' term time accommodation arrangements in order to promote the possibility of out of university contact. Engineering Teams are encouraged to be self managing in terms of the organisation of their activities leading to submission of project work within two modules. They are also encouraged to sit together and learn together throughout all modules during the two semesters of Stage 1. A more detailed account is included in Joyce and Hopkins (2011).

5.3 The University of Sunderland

At the University of Sunderland the three first degree programmes listed below were considered relevant for exploring non-continuation amongst local students. These were identified both through qualitative research with staff conducted for an audit of Sunderland's retention activity in 2009 (Donbavand 2010), and also through research conducted with local students in the early stages of this study. This latter activity established that participating local students were less likely to engage in activities aimed at developing social bonds unless a proven benefit could be demonstrated, or unless it was a requirement of their course. Therefore, it was decided to evaluate existing initiatives within a small number of programmes that combine these features. Programmes and initiatives are listed here and then expanded in the sections below.

- BA (Hons) Psychology: Students at all Levels can access course specific social space (the Sandbox Studio), and also experience the introduction of problem based learning that requires Psychology students to work together in groups
- BA (Hons) Tourism: Students travel in groups for field trips, one of which is compulsory for Level 1 students during induction week

- BA (Hons) Childhood Studies: Students take part in fundraising activities on a voluntary basis raising money for childhood-related charities such as Barnados.

5.3.1 The Sandbox Studio (Psychology)

The Sandbox Studio is a dedicated space within the Psychology Department where Psychology students are encouraged to spend time both socialising and exploring psychological concepts together. It was designed on the initiative of a Principal Lecturer in the Department who obtained the necessary funding. It is equipped with sofas and cushions, a whiteboard, a DVD player, films, novels, design and architecture magazines, video games and an Xbox plus other psychology-related materials. The aim of providing this space is “to give students a space where they can explore psychology and work together and get more involved – to see the links between psychology and the real world” (Principal Lecturer, Psychology).

5.3.2 Problem based learning (Psychology)

Problem based learning is now fully incorporated from Level 1 of the Psychology degree programme, after being introduced seven years ago at Masters level initially. A specific module has been designed for the first degree programme to ensure students maximise the benefit to be gained from problem based learning. This requires students to work in groups of eight. They work collaboratively on problems and scenarios, receiving guidance and facilitation from academic staff only when necessary. This guidance can include discussing individual contributions to the task for assessment purposes, and in the early stages is more about coaching students through the process.

5.3.3 Field Trips (Tourism)

The Tourism, Hospitality and Events Management Programme organises field trips in students' first year of study. These range from joint fact-finding expeditions around the local area to trips to major cities including London, Paris, Barcelona, Prague and New York. With the exception of some Level 1 trips which occur during the induction period, field trips are not compulsory because of the financial commitment required. Despite this, many students take part. Students who might miss out for financial reasons can apply for a grant from the Access Learning Fund. This is widely advertised as a potential means of support to take part in the Tourism trips and is widely utilised by the students.

5.3.4 Curriculum related fundraising activities (Childhood Studies)

A number of charitable fundraising activities have been developed within the Childhood Studies degree programme since 2008/9. These aim not only to raise funds for children's charities but also to provide an environment which encourages the formation of strong peer bonds through collaboration and engagement in enjoyable activities. There is a strong emphasis on enhancing the student experience through promoting a climate that prioritises both fun and learning. A lecturer involved spoke of wishing "to promote a sense of studentship and identity as students – as students on the programme – as students within the University overall". The fundraising activities referred to by staff and students involved in this evaluation included a cake sale, a sponsored walk, a mini-Olympics, white water rafting, a 'spooky sleep over' at Newcastle Castle Keep and a ski-athon.

6 Methodology

6.1 Evaluation methodology

All three institutions adopted a predominantly unified methodology with some variation in the fine details of qualitative methods, specifically in the latter stages of the project. The methodological format is set out in Tables 1-3 and the rationale for this methodology is then given.

Year of Project	Research Activity	Method	Outputs
Year 1: 2008/9	Audit of existing retention practice	Total of 34 in-depth interviews with staff across the three institutions Staff survey at Hull	Audit documents disseminated within each institution. This audit helped the identification of interventions to be included in the evaluation.
	Collaborative Survey	Online survey using a jointly developed questionnaire, managed and analysed by Newcastle Hull: 62 respondents Newcastle: 53 respondents Sunderland: 27 respondents <i>Note: Low response rates and limited student interest meant the initial plan to conduct longitudinal research with some survey respondents was revised. Hull and Sunderland students were targeted for research in years 2 and 3 via academic staff involved in the project, and Newcastle focused on first year students in successive academic years</i>	Research findings (Section 7.2)

Years 2 and 3: 2009/10 and 2010/11	Evaluation of activities within each institution (existing activities at Hull and Sunderland, new activities at Newcastle)	<p>A mixed methods approach was used to access the different student groups involved in years 2 and 3 of the project</p> <p>Methods were principally qualitative as shown in tables 2 and 3 below</p>	Research findings (Section 7.2)
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Table 1: Overview of methodology

Institution	Methods
The University of Hull	<p>Analysis of approximately 80 integration event feedback forms</p> <p>Researcher observation of approximately 40 students at integration events</p> <p>1 focus group with 4 students</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 11 students in 8 Schools</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 17 staff in 4 Schools</p>
Newcastle University	<p>3 focus groups with 21 students</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 3 students in 3 Schools of Engineering (case studies)</p> <p>Survey with 68 students in M&SE (64% response rate)</p>
The University of Sunderland	<p>7 focus groups with 48 students</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 3 academic staff in 3 programme areas</p> <p>Questions relating to student success incorporated into University of Sunderland Student Experience Survey 2010 (n=953, 9% response from population of all on campus students)</p>

Table 2: Year 2 (2009/10) Methods of evaluation within each partner institution

Institution	Method
The University of Hull	<p>Narrative analysis of approximately 85 integration event feedback forms</p> <p>Researcher observation of approximately 160-180 participants at 3 integration events</p> <p>1 focus group with 5 students</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 9 students in 5 Schools</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 7 staff in 3 Schools</p>
Newcastle University	<p>8 focus groups with 51 students</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 2 students</p> <p>3 telephone interviews with leavers; 2 face to face interviews with leavers</p> <p>Online survey with students in M&SE (n=103, 82% response rate from cohort)</p> <p>Online survey with students in CEAM (n=36, 35% response rate from cohort)</p> <p>TurningPoint student response handset survey with students in CEAM (n=59, 57% response rate from cohort)</p>
The University of Sunderland	<p>Survey with 2009/10 leavers conducted in October 2010 (n=32, 12.5% response rate from population of voluntary withdrawals / transfers out); hard copy postal format.</p> <p>3 focus groups with 18 students</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 4 students</p> <p>In-depth interviews with 3 academic staff in 3 programme areas</p>

Table 3: Year 3 (2010/11) Methods of evaluation within each partner institution

6.2 Rationale for use of methodological approaches

All methodological approaches were used by all three partner institutions except where stated otherwise. Tables 1 to 3 above provide detailed information regarding numbers and groups involved in surveys and interviews during the three years of this project, and Appendix II includes examples of instruments used for data collection.

6.2.1 In-depth interviews

An example in-depth interview schedule is included in Appendix II.

Face to face interviews were used to gain a deep insight into the views of individual research participants. This flexible technique allowed the researcher to explore greater depth of meaning than that obtained by survey techniques. They offered an opportunity for the interviewer to remain reactive to what was being expressed by the interviewee, clarifying and asking for further detail as appropriate (Roulston, 2010). Individual interviews were carried out with academic and other staff and with students. They offered an opportunity to elicit views which might have been withheld had other participants been present, whilst still offering confidentiality to the interviewee. Three students who had left an Engineering course at Newcastle University were interviewed by telephone as they had already left the region.

6.2.2 Focus groups

An example focus group schedule is included in Appendix II.

Focus groups were used throughout the research as a means of gathering the views of groups of participants with shared experiences. Focus groups facilitated the collection of in-depth qualitative feedback from groups of students and utilised the synergy which occurred between focus group members. When this is developed 'a momentum is generated which allows underlying opinions, meanings, feelings, attitudes and beliefs to emerge alongside descriptions of individual experiences' (Parker and Tritter, 2006, p.26). This method of interview facilitated the generation of rich data.

6.2.3 Surveys

The collaborative questionnaire (2008/9) and a further example questionnaire are included in Appendix II.

Surveys, using questionnaires as the data collection instrument, were used as a means of gathering information from large populations of students and also as a way of accessing the views of discrete groups of students within a larger group. Both online and hard copy self-completion questionnaires were used, including feedback forms following specific integration-related events. The collaborative survey in year 1 (2008/09) gathered both qualitative and quantitative data.

Details of populations surveyed and response rates are included in Tables 1 to 3.

6.2.4 Participant observation

The University of Hull utilised the strategy of participant observation on the Study Skills Summer School, and in the early stages of induction in the Social Science courses before interviewing students. By both observing 'participants' and participating while 'observing', this method allowed for analytical connections between the lived elements and students' immediate thoughts and reflections on them. Moreover, this method allowed the identification of categories to emerge in the data analysis rather than through collection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). However, whilst acting as a 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1996), the researcher held various roles including teaching delivery for the Summer School, rather than appearing as a student. These roles allowed the researcher the necessary level of participation without directly sharing the experience or simply observing, which retains a sense of marginality (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Thus, participant observation was selected to gain a sense of the ideas and practice(s) that involved students and their ongoing interpretations of them.

6.3 Analysis of qualitative data

The method of qualitative analysis employed was informed by several methodological perspectives including narrative analysis. The aim of using this approach was to examine the data for stories which were frequently told and examine them for content, form and function. Narrative analysis is "based on the premise that people use stories to make sense of themselves and their world and to present themselves to others" (Frost *et al.*, 2010, p. 444). As part of this process each of the pieces of collected data were repeatedly read and reread to immerse the researchers in the data and to identify those stories which were prominent until a 'thick description' (Reissman, 1993), one which revealed a strongly consistent narrative, was achieved. We were also vigilant for

occasions when stories appeared to be marginalised or silenced. A modified form of the constant comparative method (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), involving frequent conversations between the researchers and sharing of data and findings, was used to explore the data collected across the three institutions as a means of identifying where findings were similar or differed.

6.4 Analysis of quantitative data

Analysis of the collaborative survey and other surveys used various statistical methods including frequency tables to count how many, and which, students had given which pre-set responses to questions. Appropriate software packages were used to analyse statistical information including excel and SPSS, the latter enabling cross-tabulations to explore quantitative survey results further against different student categories.

Analyses of performance data relating to retention compared measures of the number of students who withdrew in our evaluation years with the same measures of the number of students who withdrew in previous years for which data were available.

At institutional level this used HEFCE Performance indicators for Hull, Newcastle and Sunderland at institutional level (Appendix I) from 2007/08 (2006/07 entrants) to 2009/10 (2008/09) entrants.

As these Performance Indicators are published two years in arrears, and the integration-focused activities evaluated in this research were not in place at institutional level, data at this level were augmented by internal data from each partner institution.

Differing institutional data management processes meant that different retention-related data sets were available from each partner institution, and these localised data were analysed separately for each partner institution. Newcastle University and the University of Sunderland's activities were at course level, and their analyses of internal performance data reflected this. The University of Hull's activities were not at course level. The data sets used for analyses were:

- at the University of Hull, the percentage of students who withdrew from Social Science Programmes, not including students who transferred to other institutions, with a focus on students who took part in the Summer School and Welcome Lunch
- at Newcastle University, an internal measure of *students remaining on the same Programme next year* to show students who satisfied HEFCE's definition of completion, then sat and passed assessment for that year to satisfy Newcastle University's progression requirements, and returned for the next Stage of their Programme
- at the University of Sunderland, data on the retention of students from Level 1 to Level 2. Evidence is presented first for all students, then with a focus on students geographically local to Sunderland (established from students' postcodes).

Table 4 shows the years for which these data were available at each institution.

Institution	Academic years for which quantitative data on student retention were available
University of Hull	2007/08 to 2009/10. Figures for 2010/11 refer to data available as at June 2011
Newcastle University	2005/06 to 2009/10
University of Sunderland	2007/08 to 2009/10

Table 4: Academic years for which internal performance data on student retention were available

6.5 Methodological challenges

The collaborative project encountered several challenges which led to reassessment of the most appropriate research methods:

- The initial collaborative survey sent out to all students in the target groups of each university yielded only a proportionately small number of replies. The questionnaire aimed to recruit students to take part in the longitudinal aspect

of the research, and asked if they would be prepared to be interviewed as part of focus groups throughout their university career. A small number of students identified their readiness to take part. However, when contacted, this number diminished significantly and it was decided to adopt alternative methods to gain qualitative feedback from student participants

- At each of the partner institutions, Schools that had initially agreed to play an active role in the research and to facilitate the participation of students became unable to do so. This was due to changing circumstances and personnel within those Schools and necessitated changes to refocus the design of the research
- Changes in management structures, staffing arrangements and role descriptions for existing staff members made it challenging to maintain continuity throughout the project
- Greater challenges than had been envisioned were encountered in maintaining face to face contact between project personnel because of the geographical locations of the three partner organisations. This was eventually overcome by arranging to meet on a monthly basis at the Higher Education Academy in York.

6.6 Evaluation of the project

Conducting a longitudinal evaluation of staff perceptions of the research process throughout the project was utilised as a means of maintaining contact between our three geographically distant institutions. It also helped to ensure a consistent and coherent approach to our methodology through promoting a recursive reflexive process. Through this process we were able to maintain awareness of impediments encountered and to adapt our research methodology when necessary. This evaluation was conducted by Newcastle University on behalf of all the partners.

This evaluation process highlighted the impact of taking part in the research process on the research facilitators, academics and others in direct contact with students in Schools where integration-related activities were being evaluated. Above all it has

helped us to maintain contact between the three partner institutions and this has helped us when analysing and interpreting our findings through the lenses of the disparate student groups studied.

The methods used to gain researcher participants' feedback were:

- qualitative semi-structured interviews with a synthesis of themes redistributed to all those who had participated
- three 'sharing good practice' groups where researcher participants from each of the institutions joined together to discuss their findings
- audio recording of core researcher group discussions on themes such as the changing context of UK higher education and funding reforms. Key themes from these were then extracted, redistributed to all participants and ultimately used to inform the project report.

6.7 Ethical considerations

All students involved in this research were assured that their comments would be treated in confidence and any quotations used would be anonymised. Staff involved in the research were offered the same assurance.

The researchers abided by the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research, and sought approval for the project through their appropriate institutional channels.

The market research company which carried out some of Sunderland's research in year 3 of the project conducted its activities according to Market Research Society Guidelines.

This report now moves to the key messages of this research and their supporting evidence.

7 Key messages

7.1 Overview of key messages

Our interlinked key messages from this research on the effects of student integration on retention are:

- Key message A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community
- Key message B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose
- Key message C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities
- Key message D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum.

These conclusions were reached through the analysis of primary qualitative and quantitative data from all three institutions. Despite three quite different institutions undertaking research with divergent student groups, students' responses and insights followed very similar patterns.

The overarching research finding is that participating full-time local students, full-time mature students, part-time students, and Engineering students (the latter predominantly but by no means exclusively traditional students) all seek an HE experience that fits within their existing life narratives (Giddens 1991). By this we mean an HE experience that fulfils both academic expectations and social needs, and enables a work/life balance that includes prior commitments, not separating the academic from the social, but rather embedding the latter within the former. This theme becomes clearer through the expansion of our four key messages in the following sections.

7.1.1 Key message A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community

Many students require the provision of opportunities to develop social ties within an academic context at the earliest possible point. By integrating social elements within academic contexts, students from various backgrounds and especially those with ongoing caring and/or work responsibilities find themselves able not only to justify their attendance, but with more opportunities to build social relations. This may take the form of working groups or teams where students either self-select or are allocated by staff; field trips; academically-positioned, defined social spaces; and, informative and/or academically oriented pre-entry events.

7.1.2 Key message B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose

By imposing structures at the earliest point, students are led by staff to engage with the academic and social environments they will inhabit through their university career. This involves introducing academic and social elements from the very beginning: placing the student as part of the School from the very start, it provides a base from which to engage with the many other induction and Freshers' Week(s) activities. It can further provide continuity and relieve anxiety by fitting with many students' expectations of university as a learning environment while providing the basis for future relationships. Whilst disciplinary paradigms inform the type of structure used, these can involve: introductory exercises briefly exploring subject-related research; compulsory field trips; group work for problem based learning; and activities facilitating the formation of teams that will continue to work together throughout the year and beyond.

7.1.3 Key message C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities

Despite varying conceptions of working in teams and groups, the general aim here is the collaborative focus on and achievement of goals. This includes opportunities for students to meet each other socially and share both knowledge and expertise as peers, grounding students as members of a 'community of peers', of Schools, and of the University. Newcastle's Engineering Teams are similar to the ongoing tutorial groups at Hull, and to problem-based learning at Sunderland: these examples show

collaborative work can increase student engagement which, we argue, contributed to quantitative improvements in student retention.

7.1.4 Key message D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum

Levels of student integration, both academic and social, vary within student groups and between students. Both Thomas and May (2010) and Tinto's (1975) models suggest there are many factors that impact upon this. As many participants saw it, successful integration involves the blending of social and academic elements throughout their university career rather than students simply becoming part of an institutional culture. This conception of integrating social elements within an academic setting helped students develop a stronger sense of integration (often through the idea of 'belonging') with the University, underscoring the entire student experience. Every event, intervention and example within this research incorporated the integration of social and academic elements, and students appeared to respond favourably to this, noting increases in their engagement with each other, with staff, and with their curricula.

Taken together, our key messages demonstrate the necessity of a holistic approach to student engagement. This approach continues throughout a student's university career: from initial outreach and contact, through application and pre-entry, during induction and initial stages, and beyond. We argue that it should be reiterated, reinforced and re-embedded throughout the student life-course to aid continuation.

This findings section now turns to our evidence for these key messages.

7.2 Research findings

7.2.1 Background to the research findings

The research began with a collaborative survey in year 1 (2008/09), the aims being not only to gain an understanding of the project's sample groups, but also to recruit participants for longitudinal research. Profiles of respondent groups from each University are given as table 5.

	University of Hull (n= 62)	Newcastle University (n= 53)	University of Sunderland (n = 27)
Gender	71% female/29% male	87% male/13% female	70% female/30% male
Age	All > 21 years	85% < 21 years	41% < 21 years
Mode of study	87% full-time	100% full-time	100% full-time
Accommodation	53% in own/parental home	94% in university/private rented	89% at home/private rented
Employment	37% (mainly < 20 hpw)	21% (mainly < 10 hpw)	48%(mainly < 20 hpw)
Caring responsibilities	29% have caring responsibilities	4% have caring responsibilities	15% have caring responsibilities

Table 5: Profile of collaborative survey respondent groups

As shown by HEFCE data at institutional level (Appendix I) the respondent groups from each university were different. Our findings nevertheless found similarities across the three groups. The collaborative survey also gave an insight into respondent groups' views on and experiences of retention, again with similarities across the three institutions' groups, which we present here through two key points.

First, that approximately a third of respondents from each institution said they had considered withdrawing during the first year of their current course (Figure 1).

Without probing for detail, this finding gave a blunt indication that *feeling like*

withdrawing was a widespread issue among these students who *had* continued with their course (the survey was conducted in June of the 2008/09 academic year).

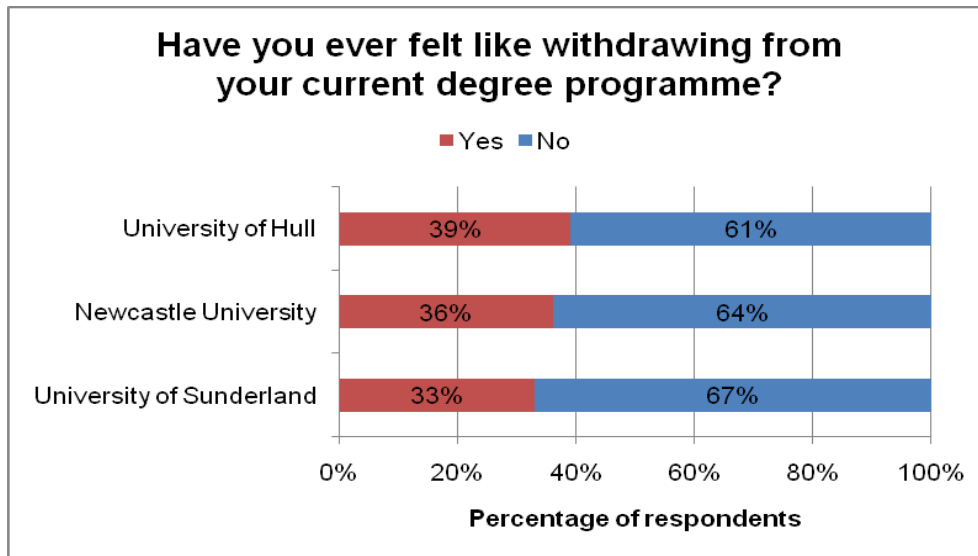


Figure 1: Collaborative survey respondents who said they felt like withdrawing from their current degree programme

Second, that students placed an emphasis on the importance of the *academic experience* of university over the *social experience* of university. Figure 2 shows that all three institutions' target groups placed similar emphasis on the importance of the academic experience being significantly greater than that of the social experience.

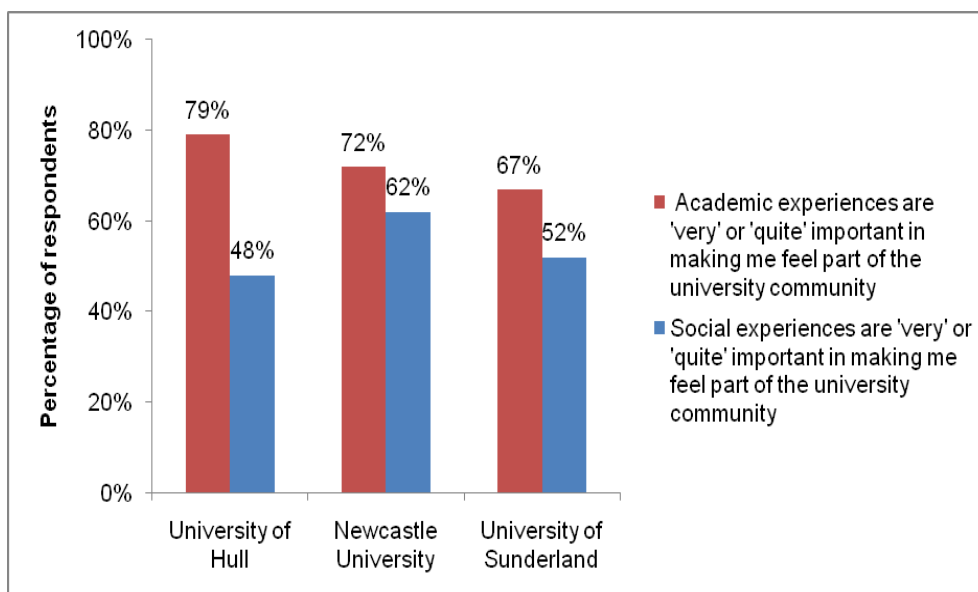


Figure 2: Collaborative survey respondents' views on the importance of *academic* and of *social* experiences in making them feel part of the University community

Despite variations in importance between the three universities, the importance of the academic in making students feel part of the University community averaged at 73% overall, while the importance of the social averaged at 54% overall. Each respondent rated the importance of their academic experience more highly than their social experience in making them feel part of their university community.

The main reasons identified by respondents as helping them to continue at university were ‘enjoying the programme’, ‘employment prospects’ and ‘self determination’.

Table 6 shows that these reasons were rated highly by students at all three institutions.

	University of Hull	Newcastle University	University of Sunderland
What helped you to stay on your degree programme? (chosen from a list of prompts)	1 st Self determination	1 st Enjoy degree programme	1 st Enjoy degree programme
	2 nd Enjoy the programme	2 nd Employment prospects	2 nd Self determination
	3 rd Employment prospects	3 rd Self determination	3 rd Friends at Uni

Table 6: Collaborative survey respondents' reasons that helped them continue at university

The combination of these choices, and the academic focus shown in figure 2, indicates these students' academic and goal focus. This finding was further confirmed in Donbavand's (2010) report on the University of Sunderland's year 1 project activity, which suggested that many local target group students are 'goal-oriented': they put store in the academic experience and the outcomes of qualifications before, and sometimes in opposition to, the social.

This section presented a context for our three respondent groups in which *feeling like withdrawing* is widespread, and students initially identify academic rather than social factors as sources of support to continue at university. The next section

presents further evidence for this goal orientation, before moving to consider the importance of the social.

7.2.1.1 Goal orientation

Student participants further highlighted this assertion in many different contexts including their choice of university, mode of study and course. One participant elucidated this particularly well:

“there was an element of pragmatism involved in that [...] rather than [...] pursue my dream, I have chosen to pursue a course which is in the area [...] but kind of mitigated to coming out, at the end of it, with a job.”

(m, ftm, H)

Potential career opportunities were a significant factor for Engineering students in “weighing up the pros and cons of going to University” (m, eng, N) in what a university education would offer and whether it might provide the security they sought. University of Hull students also commented on creating new or enhanced career prospects: a university course could lead “hopefully to a better job situation” (f, ptm, H).

Similarly, the University of Sunderland’s local students focused on pragmatic decisions and strategies for engaging in university, with a particular focus on remaining local. Reasons given for studying close to home varied considerably, reflecting the diversity of those interviewed in terms of age and family situation. A number of students said they chose the University of Sunderland for financial reasons, as it was cheaper to live with family and study locally than to move to another part of the country. Other students said their decision to study close to home was based on the quality of the University and/or the particular course they wished to join.

Personal circumstances and existing commitments were also important in decisions to study locally. Students mentioned both existing work and family commitments and said that they wanted to stay with established friends who had also decided to study locally. One local participant explained her goal orientation and linked this with a focus on academic goals over social experiences:

“I think because I’m older I put my work, my house and things like that first, so I didn’t really have time to do that type of thing and it wasn’t really why I came to university so I wasn’t really too bothered.”

(f, I, fgp, cs, S)

7.2.1.2 The importance of the social experience

Goal orientation initially appeared to overshadow the social side of the University experience for target group students. However, further exploration with participants demonstrated the necessity of the social in bolstering and adding value to the academic, and in ultimately making sense of the student experience as a single, coherent narrative.

Full-time mature and part-time students at Hull and Sunderland intimated that the social is often not a driving force behind either their decision to study or in their daily interactions with other students. Participants regularly said that they “didn’t come here to make friends”, “don’t need new friends”, and that they “already have an active social life”.

Newcastle’s Engineering students said that they were more likely to form relationships with their course and team mates because their high number of timetabled contact hours prevented daytime contact with students from other programmes.

Thus, although students’ reasons for giving primacy to the academic over the social experience varied, there were similar resonances between all three groups. Nevertheless, research participants gave quite different impressions in interviews and focus groups, which are discussed in Sections 7.2.2 to 7.2.5. The interplay between these different ideas, and the ways in which the benefits of the social experience are incorporated into the academic experience, are further detailed in our implications (Section 8.1) and stepped recommendations (Appendix III).

The overall message from our research is that:

Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff, and to engage with the curriculum.

This *integration of social and academic elements of university life* is key to the *integration of students into the School, and wider university, community*. We found that helping students feel part of the School, and wider university, community facilitates the development of both a sense of belonging, and of the relationships with staff and students that become a students' network of support. Evidence that fewer students withdrew in our evaluation years than in previous years is given in Section 7.3, suggesting that the integration-focused activities in this research contributed to the retention of more students.

This section now moves to the evidence for our first key message, and then the other three key messages in turn.

7.2.2 Key message A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community

7.2.2.1 Preparedness

The vast majority of students at each university who participated in our research, had little or no prior experience of HE. Many of these students said they “didn’t know what to expect” (m, ptm, H). The collaborative survey found that the majority of respondents at each institution said they felt only partially prepared for university (Figure 3).

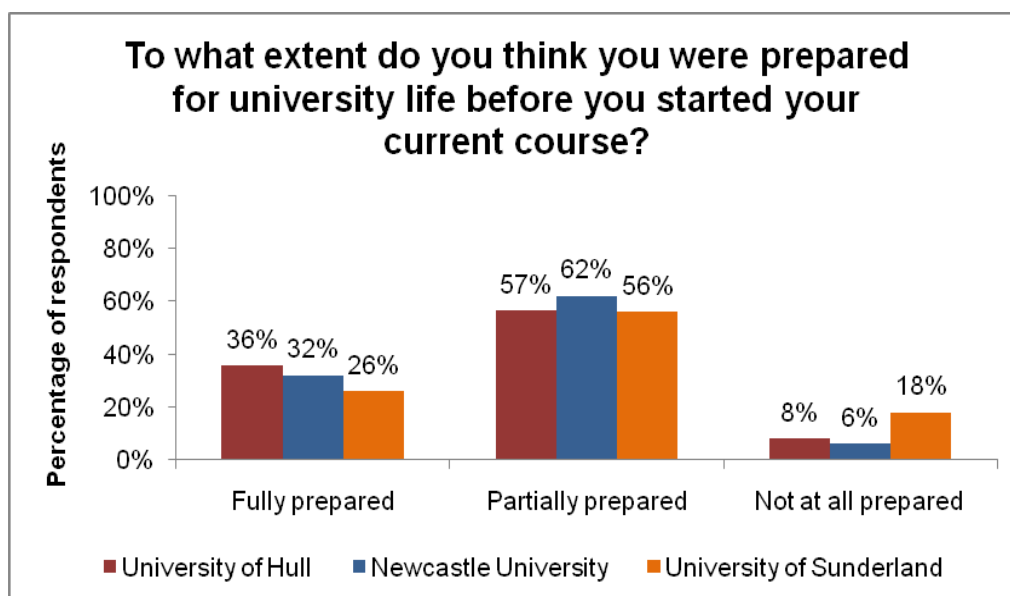


Figure 3: Collaborative survey respondents' views on their preparedness for university life

Staff interviewees suggested reasons for students' feelings of dislocation on arrival:

"That transition from college to University is always challenging and some students are not prepared when they get to University [...] I think that the bigger issue, in terms of impacting on retention is that I'm not sure that colleges were really preparing students for University..."

(staff, S)

Some Engineering students at Newcastle (especially late-applicants to their courses) noted their 'panic' at the thought of not attending university and how this contributed to choosing an unsuitable course that did not necessarily conform to their expectations, interests and skills:

"at the clearing time it was a bit of a panic so... and it sounded interesting and I didn't do as much research as I should [...] When I found out I had got on the course I was happy [...] then when I got there and did a bit of the course I realised that it wasn't quite [...] that made me think this isn't for me."

(m, eng, N)

Students with prior experience of HE said that this did not necessarily help them prepare to return to HE:

"I'd been at university for about two months as an eighteen-year-old and hated it, absolutely hated it."

(m, ftm, H)

Other students said they felt that their graduate status aided their application process by demonstrating their ability to complete academic work but still highlighted many differences between institutions: in subject areas and more generally in the amount of 'comradeship' involved in university life.

7.2.2.2 Pre-arrival and arrival

Of the three institutions, only Hull's pre-arrival activities were included in this research. This section therefore focuses on evidence from Hull.

A year 2 survey respondent at Hull insightfully commented that "it's impossible to prepare fully". This comment highlights the uncertainty and mystique surrounding HE. This view resonated with a majority of student participants for whom coming to university was daunting and "out of my comfort zone" (f, ptm, H):

“I knew the campus, I’d been here many times... but, the reality of coming was scary... I didn’t know what to expect, and there were so many youngsters all seeming to know what they were doing.”

(m, ptm, H)

These responses demonstrate the challenges participants can encounter when moving into an HE environment. It is clear that expectations and realities do not necessarily meet, and feelings of insecurity exist within both academic and social spheres.

One strategy to mitigate against such challenges is pre-entry events that provide preparatory skills and social introductions. According to attending participants, pre-entry events provided a social space within which academic and/or informative content was bolstered by relationship-building exercises and opportunities to mix with other students beginning related courses. In one student’s words:

“I thought; well, I’ll go to as much as I can just to get a look round rather than turning up on the first day feeling lost, little girl back at school type of thing. [...] A lot of people didn’t come to it and I think they were a bit ‘ooh, where do I go’... I found it very useful. Just seeing faces really. [...] the financial lady and some of the students as I say, Students’ Union rep and things like that.”

(f, ptm, H)

Moreover, whilst the Welcome Lunch served as a transitional tool, participants noted that its reach was far greater than pre-entry. It was the ongoing effects of these initial meetings that many participants saw as crucial in later stages, when students they had met at the Welcome Lunch reappeared as “a familiar face on the first day when we came back to Uni” (m, ftm, H). This demonstrates the processes by which students make sense of their new environment and add to the building of a continuous narrative that coherently links one’s past, present and future with others’ (Giddens 1991).

The impact of these early bonds between students does not simply end with the beginning of courses. A number of participants noted the continuing nature of the friendships they forged. Some indicated apparently deep connections:

“[c]ertainly one of the guys that was on the table, I’m pretty much best mates with him now. So it made a big difference.”

(m, ftm, H)

We should not underestimate the variety of relationships and friendships coming from such a short initial meeting. One student's comments showed how their social contacts at university snowballed after initial contact made at pre-entry events:

“[it] was basically what has made it easier for me to integrate because people I met there based on the one table I was sat around, are now the people I'm now socialising with... plus the people that they then knew, so kind of increased the people I know as well.”

(m, ftm, H)

Other students said that they now had social contact with other students who ranged from “acquaintances” to “extremely good friends”. Enabling the possibility of ‘friendships’ within this space was important, even if these new ‘friends’ were little more than “acquaintances” or “faces” (f, ftm, H) to both acknowledge and be acknowledged by. As many participants commented, at the very least these social relations - however nebulous - confirmed that students were ‘not alone’ or ‘the only one’, and by extension helped to maintain the sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991), in terms of the continuation of a coherent narrative.

These same themes resonated with those attending the Study Skills Summer School, where the introduction to academic elements is prized within the context of a shared social experience. Although the student focus was on the academic and/or informative elements, students also noted how the event “made me feel like a student!”, specifically “much more confident and less afraid”. When asked ‘what was the best thing about the Summer School?’ another key theme for students was:

“Meeting other mature students and getting a feeling for the University. Meeting other staff and being in a learning environment and finding out what to expect going forward.”

The majority of these anonymous quotes clearly connected the academic and/or informative elements with the social experience.

For the majority of full-time mature and part-time participants, attending purely social events could not be justified. Representative responses offered family, caring and work commitments as reasons not to attend, alongside the less concrete:

“I can't justify taking time off my studies, just to go out, I did that when I was their age.”

(f, ftm, H)

Local students at Sunderland gave similar responses, including:

“Because I’m a single parent I literally come to University to study, I don’t have the luxury of having a social life at University because I’ve got family commitments.”

(f, I, cs, S)

From these findings, it seems that in order to provide opportunities for social interactions that help to integrate students, doing so within an academic and/or informative context is most beneficial for students. The importance of structured activities/events is further evidenced in Section 7.2.3 (key message B), which considers how the imposition of structure within an unfamiliar environment enforces social norms that compel people to interact through shared experience.

7.2.2.3 Arrival and early weeks

In addition to these pre-arrival examples from Hull, integration-focused activities at Sunderland (particularly Tourism field trips) and Newcastle (particularly the CEAM T-shirt activity) were designed for students on arrival and in the first weeks of their courses. To avoid repetition the qualitative evidence for these activities’ success is presented in Section 7.2.3 with key message B. We mention these activities here to show we consider pre-arrival and on-arrival or early weeks activities part of an ongoing process of transition and integration *in which students need opportunities to form social ties within an academic context at the earliest possible point*, and to note the intersection of our key messages.

7.2.3 Key message B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose

7.2.3.1 The importance of staff on student uncertainty and not ‘fitting in’

As noted in Section 7.2.2 (key message A), many target group students were uncertain about what to expect from HE. In interviews with academic staff across the partner institutions the notion of the early introduction of structures, of forming the initial stages of university experience into a cohesive and coherent whole that makes sense to students from different backgrounds, was expressed as the “imposition of structures” (staff, H).

Despite some concerns about the negative connotations of the word ‘imposition’, a consensus among staff was that students’ knowledge gap of the structures and

conceptions of HE, and especially that of the independent learner, required the fostering of clear structures from the very beginning by a perceived authority. Although many academics did not necessarily perceive or describe themselves as ‘authority figures’, students often held them in high esteem:

“[academics] are the teachers, we hang on every word; they know what is needed and what they want us to do.”

(f, ptm, H)

As one senior academic at Hull described it, the idea of ‘imposing’ structure is:

“to provide a clear system from the start [...] one that, previously, was up to individuals.”

This shows how clear direction from academics can help students bridge the gap between previous life experiences and university, and that the early imposition of structures is important in providing a sense of continuity and coherence. As the following sections show, minimising the initial uncertainty of the student experience can be achieved by staff providing structured opportunities for social ties to develop through academic endeavours. Moreover, these social ties are ones that students point to in aiding their continuation at university.

7.2.3.2 Students’ uncertainty and ‘fitting in’

Students in all the target groups noted uncertainties in their initial stages, especially concerning ‘fitting in’ both socially and academically, and in making friends and acquaintances. This could affect choices, as a participant who had engaged in both part- and full-time study noted:

“fear of the unknown, not being able to achieve, fear of walking into a class of 18 year olds and there I am... and that’s a huge fear. That’s a massive thing to overcome. So, I thought ‘right, I’ll take it steady’ and I chose to do the part-time degree.”

(f, ftm, H)

Other mature students noted similar uncertainties. As a male student with previous university experience put it:

“large classes I find very off-putting. I’m conscious of my accent. I’m conscious of my age. I’m conscious of my bald spot”

(m, ftm, H)

In both cases, the sense of uncertainty is one of feeling out of place and not 'fitting in' rather than of serious doubts about their academic ability, although the two undoubtedly link together. The importance of their social experience appeared in many participants' narratives. Although reasons not to become involved were often pragmatic they could also invoke a sense of loss at times:

"[...] I really wanted to go out but I just couldn't because I didn't have the time... and when people were coming in and talking about how they'd been out and had all their wristbands on, I was proper jealous."

(f, l, fgp, cs, S)

This lack of informal social connection could also be accentuated by a sense of not belonging to the group of students who lived in Halls of Residence:

"a lot of the people in our class aren't from here. When they were going on nights out they were going out together because they all lived in Halls. They had already made friends."

(f, l, fgp, cs, S)

This could lead to a sense of alienation as demonstrated by two female Tourism students. One said that she didn't "feel like a proper student" and another that she "felt a bit left out" as a result of lack of engagement in the social aspects of their degree programme. Another student summarised neatly what he saw as a key divide by saying:

"It's mostly all the halls, like everyone staying in halls and then local people"

(m, l, cs, S)

Although this sense of uncertainty was less pronounced among participating Engineering students, becoming involved was important for this group too. When social and academic activities were integrated this engaged students more deeply, as this participant commented:

"If I hadn't been in a team I probably would have come to lectures and gone off again... I would kind of feel like I have only come here for the education stuff but when you get to know a few people and you have group work together then you kind of... just mix in... you feel like the project is worthwhile doing because you work with people and feel more like you are in the School"

(m, eng, N)

7.2.3.3 *The importance of staff and the imposition of structure*

As shown in the preceding sections, the formation of peer groups can happen in different ways. Some relationships seem to occur by chance: participants gave examples of when these relationships began including waiting in line to register, the person one happened to sit next to, and “getting lost together” (f, ftm, H) while looking for a lecture theatre or office. Nevertheless, students reporting unease and uncertainty on arriving at university, and especially those who arrived placing little value on the social experience, responded positively to the early imposition of structures within which academic and social elements entwined. As Willis (2008) has suggested, planned activities within induction week and the first semester may have an impact on retention of students as these have the potential to facilitate bonds between peers that may then become key areas of support. This is reinforced by Vinson *et al.* (2010):

‘this seminal initial stage of the first few weeks at university can have a substantial effect on students’ eventual socialization into university culture and therefore their engagement with educationally effective practices’ (p133).

In Newcastle University’s CEAM the induction week social activity involved project group formation through identification of others with similar interests. The opportunity to meet and interact with others in a relaxed atmosphere at a very early point in the course were described positively, with opportunities for fun and laughter as an additional bonus:

“...and we all started just laughing and carrying on and you had to write things on the T-shirts which we enjoyed....it was a really good thing to say to other people ‘I have got that on my T-shirt as well’ and you met more people and we just stuck to the people that we first got to talk to.”

(f, eng, N)

Several students who described themselves as to some extent ‘shy’ recognised the benefits of a brief period of social unease:

“Yeah, I think I am quite shy, so I think actually it is quite a good thing to pressure you to mix with people rather than just hanging back and not doing things.”

(f, eng, N)

The Degree Programme Director’s explicit instructions and active social intervention in encouraging students to move out of their comfort zones seemed to have had a

direct impact upon the success of the activity. When interviewed she described her perception of the activity:

“The buzz in here was amazing – everyone was talking, chatting.....and even the quiet ones. I specifically went around the quieter groups – I was interested in seeing whether there was going to be segregation – the international students not feeling quite as ...and to an extent it started emerging but I actually forcefully said... ‘no, no, no,... girls ...come on, let’s’...!”

Being given explicit instructions about how the exercise should be conducted appeared to largely relieve these new students’ sense of uncertainty. Being told that they must seek out specific categories of others provided both impetus and official sanction to resist any tendency to cluster together with other students of the same gender, ethnicity or social class. This focus group participant summarised this tendency and the potency of what happens when, as she put it, “you get told”:

“....it is all on appearance who groups together immediately....*until you get told*...if we hadn’t had that specification of the group that you have to mix with different sexes and different ethnic backgrounds I don’t think it would have happened.”

(f, eng, N)

Similarly, students at the University of Sunderland were engaged in ways that promote the integration of academic and social elements within defined structures, using examples such as problem based learning and excursions relevant to the programme of study. Freshers’ Week activities for Tourism students include compulsory activities such as field trips around Sunderland and to Whitby. Although some students did not see the purpose of these events at the time, they later realised how effective they had been in helping them become familiar with their environment:

“I met people during the day yeah. We did a little run around the city, getting into different things. I thought it was a bit tedious, but now when I actually look back it was just getting people to familiarise themselves with the city which was quite clever.”

(m, I, fgp, t, S)

Other local Tourism students commented on the increase in their sense of ‘belonging’ and integration with both their course(s) and peers:

“I feel more part of the group than before, which makes my course easier because I can ask anyone in my course if I've got any difficulties.”

(I, fgp, S)

These participants linked the elements of the social and academic as a coherent whole with the structured nature of the event allowing the opportunity to build social relations within an academic space that maintains a sense of continuity and purpose. There is also the implication that imposing structures that combine academic and social spheres need not be overtly obvious, or instantly recognisable by the students themselves. Indeed, many mature, local, and part-time participants raised themes around desiring more accessible social activities, but ones without any clearly recognisable, or obvious organisational structure. One student captured the mood in this comment:

“it'd be nice to do something, a dinner or dance or something... not formal, or anything like that [...] just something we kind of turn up to, kind of arranged.”

(f, ftm, H)

This section suggested that bringing students together within a structured, academic environment appeared to increase students' sense of integration, or belonging, with peers, programmes, and the University as a whole. Staff were key in the process of giving legitimacy to an event, and in reminding students that these events are compulsory. Nevertheless, it should be clear that a key element of these examples is their early timing: by having these events at the earliest possible point, uncertainties about 'fitting in' appear to be allayed. This also allows opportunities for students to begin to build groups of peers that share academic and social experiences.

The next section presents evidence about social groupings used to support academic work.

7.2.4 Key message C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities

This section points to the importance of staff in facilitating students working in groups and teams. This includes setting, elucidating and enacting clear structures from the earliest possible point.

The overall theme of working in teams and groups applied to all three institutions' findings but in practice looked different for each institution. For this reason we have presented the three institutions' evidence separately, within the theme of teams and groups.

7.2.4.1 Fundraising in Childhood Studies (University of Sunderland)

The University of Sunderland's Childhood Studies degree programme attracts a high proportion of local and mature students. The organisers of activities for students on this course have tried to ensure that the activities appeal to as broad a spectrum of students as possible, including those with children of their own. In interviews, academic staff stressed the importance of the activities in aiding integration and the students' sense of involvement in the University community, the wider community, and with their curriculum. One lecturer commented:

"One of the things that we want to see in the fundraising activities, because most of the students aren't spending enough time at the University, they were coming in and going out and we want to encourage more social integration and more of a sense of community."

Whilst this clearly provides a sense of continuity for students by linking the wider community with the process of academic and social involvement within the institution, it also serves to engage students through the input of academic staff. Information is provided to students about the events by email and during lectures and there is evidence that staff members put significant effort into encouraging students to attend.

"They really do try and get you to do it. They do lots to get people involved. The lecturer who runs it stops you and questions us on why you're not doing it."

(m, I, cs, S)

These students did not seem to mind being pressured to attend or being nominated, and the influence of staff is clear. When asked about improvements, students spontaneously mentioned strategies that have already been implemented and also discussed an interest in mixing year groups:

"They've realised quite a lot of the course, our year especially, we're really like cliquey. We didn't really do anything. That's why it started off. And then the first years and second years and third years, I think it's trying to get us all involved a bit more."

(I, fgp, cs, S)

One staff member also mentioned how the activities have encouraged interaction across different years and how there is evidence that older students offer support to younger students as a result:

“Because of the relationship between the second year students and the third year students we see the third year students preparing students for their transitions into their final year, especially making them aware of the expectations and how to manage their time.”

The students further discussed this directly, referring to how past students came in to talk about how they are using the degree and their experiences. The students were positive about this, seeing it as an effective means of preparation and information and said they would like to see more of it, suggesting that it could be a useful way to aid decision making at the end of their first year when choosing their specialism:

“In our first few lectures we had a couple of people in from the third year I think it was who were saying what things are like there and where they’ve gone with it, but it would have been good to have had a couple of people who have just finished.”

(m, I, fgp, cs, S)

For these participants, the events above allowed several instances of integration: with their course(s), the University, staff, peers and other fellow students, and the wider community. This occurred through the integrating of social events within academically positioned structures. As one staff member commented, it:

“gives much more of a sense of community. The third years have now been mentioning it to the second years, and the second years [...] to the first years to help them get much more involved.”

Focus group students noted that:

“sense of belonging has been increased and you can develop a better relationship with teachers as well as other students. It also shows that we genuinely care about children and that is why we do the Childhood Studies course.”

(fgp, cs, S)

7.2.4.2 Problem based learning in Psychology (University of Sunderland)

Another example of imposing structures and early group formation occurred with problem based learning, which is now incorporated throughout Sunderland’s Psychology degree programme after its initial introduction at Masters level in 2003.

Students are divided into groups of eight and these groups are seen by the academic staff as being highly successful in encouraging interaction and helping students to form social bonds. A senior lecturer noted the difference problem based learning has made in the students' level of success and on their level of fun and enjoyment:

"Every year I take student feedback at the end of the module... And enjoyment and fun always comes out as a positive. They always put the caveat in, 'But we're learning at the same time'. It's fun, and it's very sociable, and it's great for that sort of group sense of identity, 'but we're learning at the same time'."

Student feedback about the type of learning encouraged by the approach was largely positive also:

"[...]I like that you can work together and somebody can bring a piece of information that you've never heard of, and you can bring something that somebody else has never heard of, and then you can swap them and find out how they found it and what's in the research. I like that."

(m, l, psy, S)

As might be expected there were some students who engaged with problem based learning activities less actively than did others. Staff in Psychology tried to implement means of overcoming this by setting up "expectations and rules of engagement at the start" and by having an evaluation of not only the group's work but also of group processes. A principal lecturer said she would also actively intervene if she became aware of there being inequality of participation.

Some students also identified issues with the group selection process, reinforcing the desire for greater degrees of structure as organising principles:

"...instead of saying, 'Put yourselves in groups,' maybe she could put us in groups. I think that would be easier for people to be like, 'Right, I'm going to have to because I've been put in this group'."

(f, l, psy, S)

Working in a group could also be an extremely positive experience, especially when bonds were formed early and became stronger as a result of shared experiences.

This student described her group's positive experience:

"I made [friends] through my seminars, really. I got four really good friends, and I've just clicked with them straight away, and then we sit together in

lectures and stuff. And now I'm working on this project with them and we've been meeting up outside of Uni and stuff."

(f, l, psy, S)

7.2.4.3 Engineering Teams (Newcastle University)

Focus group participants from Newcastle University also commented on how the process of being allocated into teams within the first week of term had the effect of decreasing their sense of disorientation and potential loneliness. This student's words were representative of many others:

"In the first hour... you were sat in the introductory lecture thinking 'I don't know anyone', 'how am I going to make friends?' and they said 'we are going to put you in these teams' and instantly there was... straight away there was like 10 or 11 other people you knew straight away"

(m, fgp, eng, N)

Having team mates was seen as representing academic support and the opportunity to share knowledge and skills within a developing social environment. This peer support could make it less necessary to access support from lecturers and tutors:

"...if I am stuck with anything and they are just good support...it works both ways too [...] and if you have people straight from the beginning that you can bounce stuff off...that helps, because you don't always need to go to the lecturer and try and find them"

(m, eng, N)

However team working was not without its frustrations, especially if there was a perception amongst team members that one or more person was not "pulling their weight". As noted in the following section, groups who were in any way marginal used specific strategies for dealing with this frustration. Where the frustration was most intense this was related to a loss of control of the marks awarded to each individual if compromised by the non-participation of a team member.

Despite these frustrations, in the two years that the system of Engineering Teams has been running in M&SE at Newcastle University, positive student feedback about them has increased. An online questionnaire survey showed that in both 2009/10 and 2010/11 the majority of students either 'very much' or 'somewhat' enjoyed working as part of an Engineering Team (Figure 4).

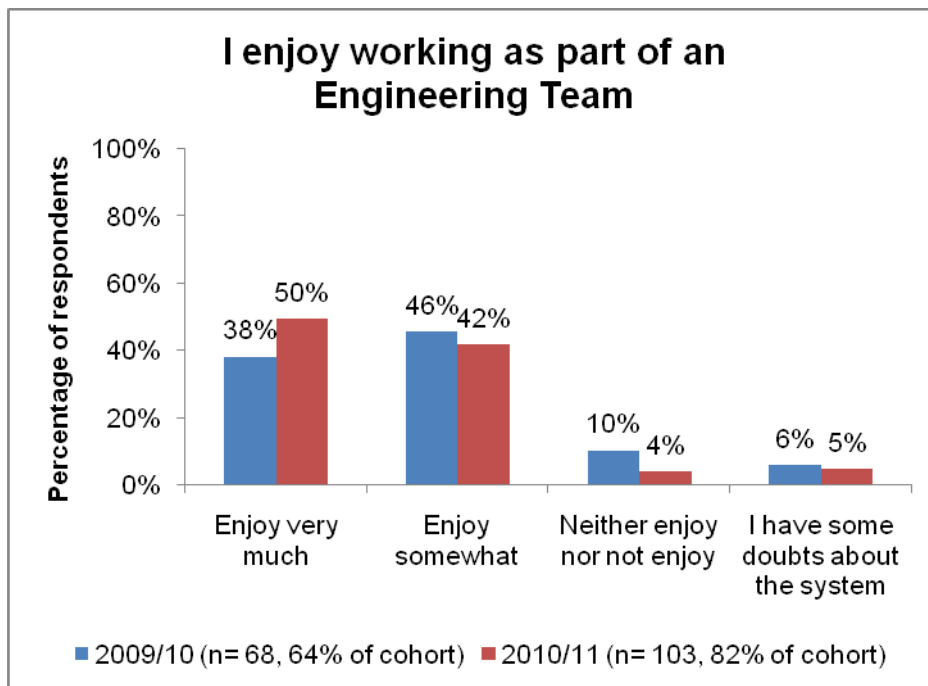


Figure 4: M&SE students' enjoyment of working as part of an Engineering Team

Comparing 2009/10 data with 2010/11 data showed that a higher percentage of students 'very much' enjoyed working as part of an Engineering Team in the second year of this initiative, and that fewer students were ambivalent about the initiative or had doubts about it (Table 7).

	Enjoy very much	Enjoy somewhat	Neither enjoy nor not enjoy	I have some doubts about the system
Change from 2009/10 to 2010/11	+12 percentage points	-4 percentage points	-6 percentage points	-1 percentage point

Table 7: Percentage point change from 2009/10 to 2010/11 M&SE students' enjoyment of working as part of an Engineering Team

Figure 5 shows that the majority of respondents in both 2009/10 and 2010/11 agreed that being part of an Engineering Team had helped them to feel that they 'belong'¹ in the School. Comparing 2009/10 data with 2010/11 data showed that the proportion

¹ The term 'belonging' was used as a proxy for the term 'integration', which our collaborative partner survey showed was poorly understood by students.

of respondents who agreed with the statement rose by 11 percentage points in the second year of this initiative.

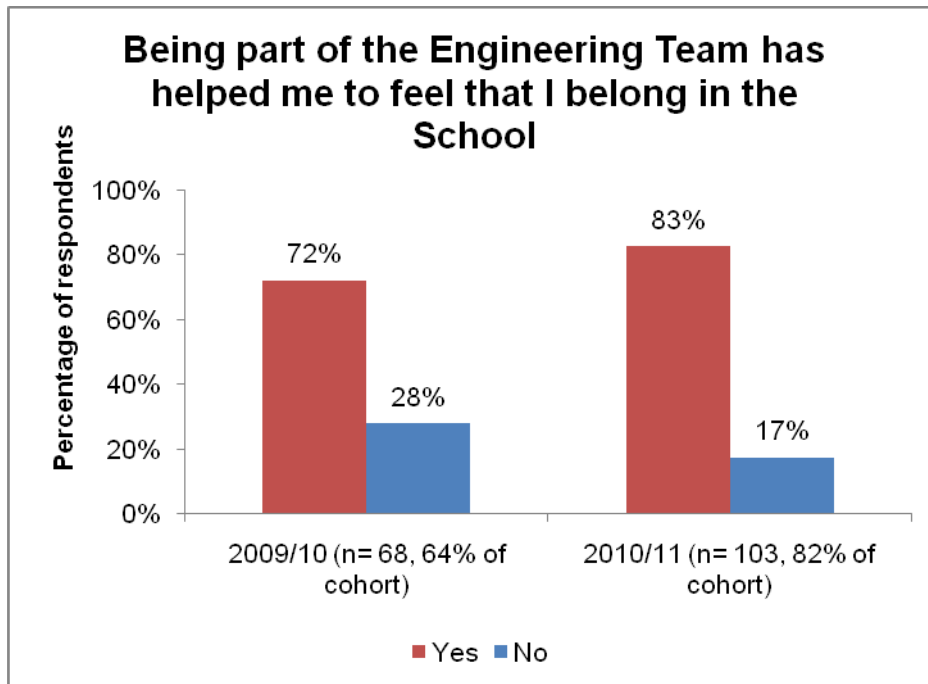


Figure 5: Engineering Teams and M&SE students' feeling of belonging to their School

7.2.4.4 Being a minority in a team (Newcastle University)

Feedback from students taking part in focus groups in 2009/10 indicated the possibility that any group who viewed themselves, or were viewed by others, as a minority, had the potential to adopt specific strategies for team working. Groups within the cohort for one School of Engineering at Newcastle University who represented a statistical minority (2010/11) were women (10%), mature students (8%) and international (EU and non-EU) students (15%). It was therefore decided to invite members of these groups to take part in focus groups as a means of exploring whether they used strategies, and if so, their effects upon teams' functioning.

These three minority groups had specific identities but also shared some fundamental similarities. Members of each group had deeply considered entry into their programme. For one male mature student it was “a last chance”, and as one female focus group participant commented “women don't just casually go into Mechanical Engineering!”. All three groups were highly motivated to succeed.

The strategies used by all three groups seemed to be aimed at both reducing the chance of their marginalisation and also ensuring that their team mates' behaviour did not jeopardise their own chances of success.

Women focus group participants used culturally compatible gendered strategies to ensure their team position, often through the acceptance of additional 'tasks'. These included having to 'prove' that they possessed a range of skills and to show that, as women, they had the strength of character to 'take' teasing, patronisation and mild sexist banter without demur. This was felt to be something of a preparation for working life, as this student commented:

"At the end of the day you will probably be a couple of girls [*sic.*] with all these men anyway so you have got to be able to take it."

In some cases, they were also prepared to adopt a role of supporting the team and compensating for the interests and preferences of their male colleagues, as described here:

"Sometimes when we are doing projects the boys [*sic.*] want to do all the exciting stuff and there are lots of long, boring things to do and they don't want to do it[...]we will write up the report, don't worry! **[laughing]**"

(fg, f, N)

Despite this perceived disparity there was no sense from the majority of the group that this depleted their appreciation of their male team mates: they enjoyed "working with the lads". However, two women participants who were also overseas students who did not use these strategies said they felt that they had been excluded and felt the need to react assertively.

The male overseas students adopted a tentative strategy towards integration. They were often surprised by being required to work as part of a team, having previously experienced educational systems which valued individual effort. Some also described a difficulty in acquiring full membership of their group; something they attributed to their lack of sophisticated language skills which they thought might lead others to disregard their input:

"...they just think you don't know what is going on, like so... they make decisions without you [...] they just tell you what to do."

They were often hesitant about taking the initiative or putting forward their ideas and, like the women students, sought ways to make themselves acceptable to team mates. However, some overseas students with English as an additional language said team working helped them develop their language skills.

Mature Engineering students are not a homogenous group. Those who appeared obviously older or whose caring responsibilities made them less available to their team were most at risk of marginalised team membership. One obviously older student said that he “stuck out a mile”, and another that “I *know* I belong here, but I don’t *feel* as if I do”.

Older students faced the paradox of struggling to learn whilst facing the expectation of their younger peers that they should have a higher level of knowledge and skills: expecting derision if they did not. Mature students interviewed were concerned if their younger team mates exhibited poor time keeping or low academic motivation. If they felt that their own success might be compromised they were likely to be ‘blunt’ or to impose rules and set boundaries for team behaviour:

“Maybe I am going to miss this opportunity and I am going to lose a mark which is quite important in this time of my life...everything must be on time or most of the time, in time instead of on time...”

(fg, m, N)

The strategies used by all three groups were used successfully as a means of ensuring success amongst highly motivated minority students and promoting their own sense of integration. Academic staff using team and group work should maintain awareness that students in any kind of minority groups have the potential to adopt strategies such as these and may require additional support.

7.2.4.5 Tutorial groups (University of Hull)

These same themes of the benefits of group work emerged strongly from Hull participants for whom early group formation occurred through clear structures within their course and/or School. In the case of restructured first year provision, where the formation of small tutorial groups is led by an academic within the initial hours of induction, students from different backgrounds (and mature students in particular) all spoke of positive outcomes. This mature student’s words returned to the theme of not knowing what to expect:

“...I think I’d built it up in my head that my days were going to be filled and I’d have loads to do, with massive reading lists in the first week and stuff to look at and, it doesn’t happen like that does it? So that week’s hard.”

(f, ftm, H)

For another participant the sense of discontinuity and uncertainty came from a lack of structure and purpose in the very first stages. However, the structure provided through a tutorial group was useful as described by this student:

“I think it has been hugely beneficial for me because it’s really nice to come in and know you can see a friendly face and that when you go in [...] and then the people you’re sat with become the people that you work with in the seminar.”

(f, ftm, H)

Comments from staff focused on the formation of friendship groups from the induction events and within the context of the tutorial. Staff said they saw tutor groups of students “socialising as a group, having coffee... outside of tutorial times”, and were aware of students keeping contact with group members who were absent through illness or other commitments. Another positive outcome was the formation of links between older and younger students:

“they seem pretty relaxed with each other... the mature students gee along the younger ones, but they also are gaining confidence and more happy to speak and give their opinions. ”

These positive experiences were not necessarily universal. Some staff identified challenges when attempting to merge these changes with other activities in the existing academic tutorial structure. Furthermore, the success of forming groups and creating structures was not without its downsides and unexpected consequences. Whilst the majority of interview participants commented on the positive nature of these as allowing spaces and opportunities to build relations with each other within informative and worthwhile settings, the obverse to this could be that groups were also by definition exclusive. As one student put it:

“the downside to it is you don’t mix. And as much as I came into it thinking ‘I don’t want to mix. I want to stand off,’ you don’t get new ideas. You don’t get a different way of thinking because you get used to the way other people are thinking and you also get the dominance of the characters as well.”

(f, ftm, H)

This section considered the effects of group and team formation in benefiting students' sense of integration, or belonging, through providing opportunities for social ties to develop within an academic context. All the examples demonstrated the positive effects of group and team formation within an academic context that ensures continuity and purpose through providing structure. The importance of staff involvement and direction reappears within this, linking students together and giving an event or task legitimacy. Staff awareness of the potential for marginalisation of groups who are minorities in any context allows them the opportunity to monitor and intervene should this become necessary. Furthermore, the early timing of group or team formation again appeared to impact upon allaying students' fears and uncertainties.

This, and the previous key findings, also point towards the final key message:

Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff, and to engage with the curriculum.

7.2.5 Key message D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum

A common thread throughout our key messages is the integration of social and academic spheres and the effect upon student integration. Not only is this a feature of all of the events and strategies employed, but it is also representative of the underplayed desire for social experience of many of our respondents and participants (Section 7.2.1.2). We have also shown that focusing students' attention on academic endeavours within groups adds opportunities for social relations to occur when they might otherwise have not. The involvement of staff in imposing structures that integrate social and academic elements has clear effects on stabilising students' uncertainties, and in creating bonds between staff, students and the curriculum. As a Sunderland student said,

“I think certain members of staff make you feel like an integral member.”

(m, fgp, S)

This overall theme of integrating the social and academic elements of university life applied to all three institutions' findings but in practice again looked different for each institution. For this reason we have presented the three institutions' evidence separately within this theme.

7.2.5.1 Tourism, Childhood Studies, and Psychology (University of Sunderland)

Sunderland's October 2010 survey of full-time on campus students (undergraduate and postgraduate) who had voluntarily withdrawn or transferred out of their course had a 12.5% response rate (32 respondents from a population of 254). These results therefore offer only a glimpse into the context and process of student withdrawal.

When questioned about a variety of aspects of the initial phase of their university experience, the aspects that the majority of these students identified as being "not that easy" or "difficult" were mainly relational: "getting involved in university life", "making friends on the course", "making friends in the University" and "getting to know lecturers". About half of these students who withdrew said that they did not make friends, that they were lonely, and did not feel involved in university life; almost two thirds felt they would have benefitted from a greater degree of academic support. Slightly more than half of these students found it difficult to manage financially and/or did not enjoy their course. There were also more positive responses: half of these students said that in the first weeks at the University they experienced a sense of belonging on their course, and almost two thirds said the same about a sense of belonging to the University.

When asked how they coped with University it became obvious that social life at university was problematic for these students, particularly those who identified that they had a social network outside of the University. This section now moves to the role played by the intervention-focused activities we evaluated in facilitating students' sense of belonging.

Tourism students said that their field trips had been instrumental in developing their sense of belonging to their cohort. Students identified how a trip "strengthens the whole group on a social basis" (fgp, t, S), and their comments indicated that for them this social interaction was a necessary precursor to academic interaction:

“After the trip everyone seems more friendly. I feel more part of the group than before which makes my course easier because I can ask anyone in my course if I’ve got any difficulties.”

(fgp, t, S)

Childhood Studies students also commented on how their fundraising activities had “created a positive environment within the class” (fgp, cs, S). They noted the importance of staff in facilitating this sense of belonging. For most participants this meant belonging to their course and/or to the University of Sunderland, as they expressed mixed opinions on whether they felt they belonged to their Faculty.

The Sandbox Studio for Psychology students integrates social interactions with an academically focused environment. This initiative has a rationale of focusing students’ attention on the campus. One lecturer commented on this, noting that students initially needed an introduction to its use:

“We were finding that if students had a gap between lectures, they would go home and not come back till the next lecture. So it was ‘how do we make them want to stay here in between times, and to use that time effectively?’ [...] I thought, ‘Right, I’ll run a module at the same time that models how that room could be used’. So the Level Two students knew how to use it, and I think other students maybe were a bit nervous about it.”

This demonstrates the necessity of staff involvement in engaging students with the use of such a space, but more importantly in integrating the social with the academic. By involving students academically, through a module, staff instigated a sense of purpose to the space that highlighted both academic and social elements and allowed students the opportunity to develop these further. As this student said:

“the Sandbox is really good for interaction and it does feel really homely rather than a place of study, which I think you do need rather than just some set place where you have to go and you feel as if you have to study.”

(m, l, psy, S)

A further aspect of the Sandbox Studio’s effect on integrating students is the development of cross-Stage groups, as this student noted:

“...we were trying to work out what we were going to do for our project and the third years that were in the room got up and got their projects that they

were working on last year and they were like going through it and stuff, talking to you.”

(f, l, fgp, psy, S)

7.2.5.2 CEAM (Newcastle University)

An unexpected emphasis which emerged from an evaluation of two different team formation methods in Newcastle University’s CEAM was that independent of team formation, students had formed very close social bonds. The closeness of the bonds between the students and what appeared to be their high level of integration within their cohort and the School had been observed by the Degree Programme Director and her colleagues. She commented on the increased number who had attended the end of term Ball:

“...three years ago I ended up on a table with the handful of the first years that came along [...] there were about six or seven of them...second years maybe a few. [...]This year the room was packed [...] there must have been about 20 or 30 of the first years – that’s like a third of the class.”

An online survey in May 2011 of the Stage 1 cohort explored the nature of these bonds, students’ perceptions of how they had been formed, and the social and academic implications of their existence. What emerged was the congruence of respondents’ high sense of ‘belonging’² to the School with the high level of bonds formed between course-mates. When asked about their sense of ‘belonging’, 29 of 36 students said they ‘always’ or ‘mostly’ felt they belonged in the School (Figure 6).

² The term ‘belonging’ was used as a proxy for the term ‘integration’, which our collaborative partner survey showed was poorly understood by students

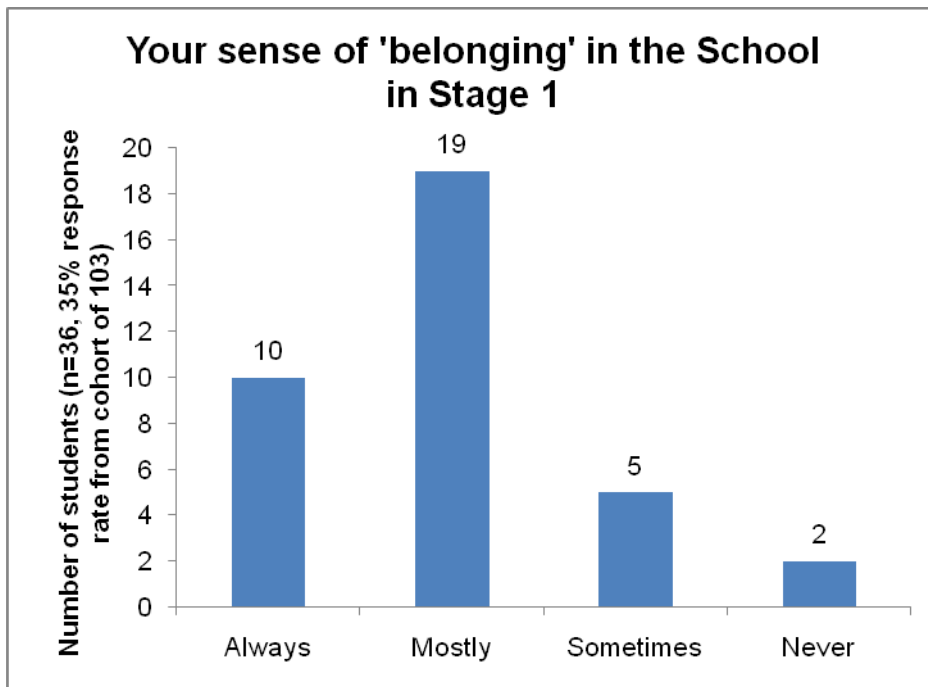


Figure 6: CEAM students' sense of 'belonging' in their School

When asked if they had formed close bonds with their peers students' responses were entirely positive: all students either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' (Figure 7).

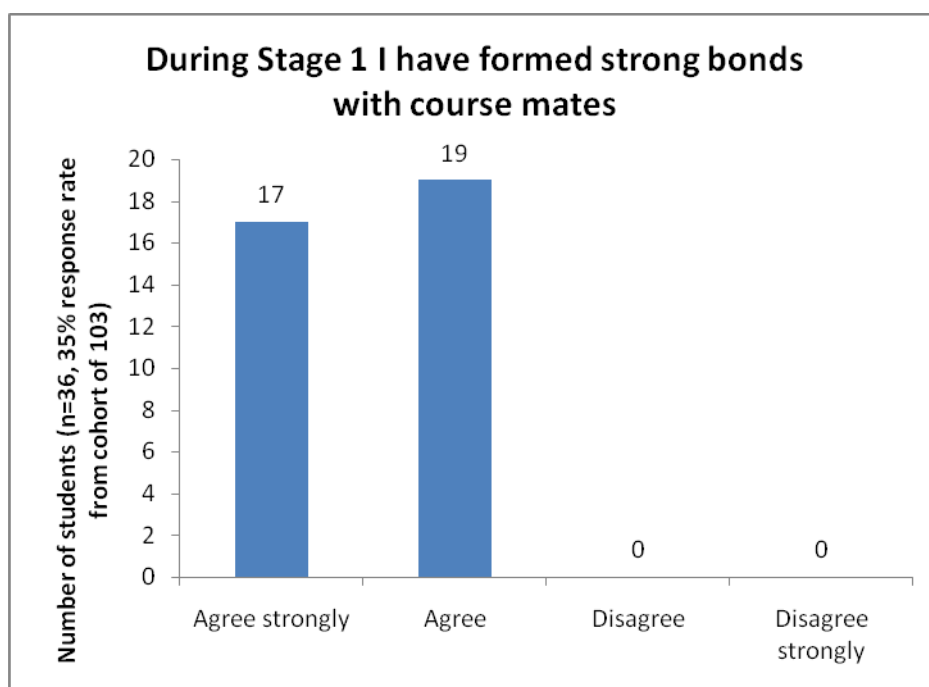


Figure 7: CEAM students' views on the bonds they formed with course mates

Respondents were also asked about the relationships they felt had influenced their sense of belonging. Multiple responses were possible. Almost all students said their friendship groups had been an influence, and 23 of 36 students said either Semester 1 or Semester 2 project groups had been an influence (table 8).

Possible responses	Number of responses (multiple responses were possible)
Friendship group within degree programme	33 of 36 students
Project group (Fuel Cell Semester 1)	15 of 36 students
Project group (design case study Semester 2)	15 of 36 students
My tutor or other lecturers	6 of 36 students
None of the above	1 of 36 students

Table 8: CEAM students' views on the relationships that had influenced their sense of belonging

Although it is impossible to establish definitively from this survey which factors were of most significance in facilitating these close bonds, it seems that School-facilitated integration activities had a significant impact. When asked how many of the course mates with whom they had formed relationships at the start of the year they still mixed with socially, 28% of the respondent group reported that this was “all of them” and a further 58% “most of them”. When asked how many of the course mates with whom they had collaborated academically at the beginning of the year they still mixed with socially the rate was lower, with 11% responding that this was “all of them” and 31% “most of them”.

The interaction between social bonds/friendships and academic work was also evident with 32% of the group saying that they “spend time with friends (not team mates) working together on academic projects” and a further 44% responding that friends had been a source of help and support when they did not understand academic work.

These responses support the notion that social bonds are formed at a very early point in the academic year through activities which promote integration, and that

working together on academic projects sustains these bonds. Focus group participants in CEAM said that they found working in teams a positive experience and that it provided opportunities for sharing knowledge and ideas and for collaborative learning:

“It’s a great help because we always work as a group to make sure every individual understands everything.”

(fgp, N)

Students’ responses showed that *how* teams were formed matter less than *that* bonds were formed. Initial social interaction was subsequently reinforced through collaboration on academic projects and working in multiple academic groups and teams, creating a mutually reinforcing recursive loop.

7.2.5.3 Summer School and Welcome Lunch (University of Hull)

This ‘loop’ where the academic and social mutually reinforce each other was also apparent in Hull’s research with mature and part-time students. The Summer School focuses on academic and transferable study skills in tandem with social elements. The targeting of particular groups facilitates a sense of camaraderie as students form networks with peers on their course:

“...I felt much more able when I realised ‘we all were learning this’ and I wasn’t the only one, and I now had people to share this with and keep me going [...] and they did when I needed it.”

(f, ftm, H)

This shared experience reinforces the academic endeavour, bringing continuity and a sense of involvement and engagement both with fellow students and with the curriculum. Moreover, it ultimately assisted this participant in continuing through links to peers with whom she shared support. Both the Welcome Lunch and the School provision engage students socially through integrating the social with academic structures. Students said these integration-focused activities helped them continue through and beyond their first year. Making friends was vital:

“make friends, it’s not what I came here to do and didn’t really want to, but it was kind of part of the [weekly] work... I kind of had to... and, I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t.”

(m, ftm, H)

Knowing people on the same course was also important:

“we’ve kept each other going and it’s all from the very start, from the lunch. Knowing we’d be in [the same] classes together brought us together. We said ‘we can help each other’ and that’s what we did, and we’re all mates and y’know have a coffee and a chat, about Uni and about, well...”

(f, ftm, H)

This again demonstrates the importance of integrating social elements within the academic framework, rather than institutions only seeking to include students within the University. Yet the former appears to assist in delivering the latter. For some students (particularly mature or local students), existing commitments dictate availability to attend social events: as noted, an academic and/or informative framework provides a justification for attendance.

7.2.6 Summary of findings and mapping to *What Works?* conceptual model

The process of integrating the social and academic into a cohesive whole has undercut every aspect of our key messages. It appears as a driving ethos behind the formation of retention strategies, events and interventions. Based on these qualitative findings, by explicitly integrating the social and academic elements, universities may see an increase in the integration of their students, both with each other and ultimately with the institution.

This section summarises our key findings and maps them against the *What Works? Student Retention and Success* conceptual model (Thomas and May, 2010).

- **Key message A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community**

This key finding maps within the central part of the model at the point of overlap between the social and academic aspects of student experience and in the promotion of student engagement and belonging. It features aspects of building students’ capacity to engage as well as building on the capacity of staff to facilitate student engagement.

- **Key message B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose**

This finding focuses on the development of staff understanding and capacity to facilitate student engagement both between groups of peers and with staff using a clear, directed, boundaried and supportive approach to interaction. It fits within the model in that it encourages participation from groups who might view themselves or be viewed as different.

- **Key message C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities**

Again this key finding maps against the conceptual model in terms of both student engagement and belonging as well as staff capacity building. It focuses on the academic sphere as being key to both academic and social integration. There are also issues of institutional management and co-ordination in facilitating change within the learning environment.

- **Key message D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum.**

This is an overarching finding.

The report now turns to quantitative evidence of the impact of our integration-focused activities.

7.3 Performance Data

7.3.1 Introduction to performance data

The evidence provided in Section 7.2 showed that these integration-focused activities were important to students. This section gives evidence from retention performance data that fewer students withdrew in our evaluation years than in previous years, suggesting that the integration-focused activities in this research contributed to the retention of more students.

It would be simplistic to argue that the integration-focused activities evaluated in this research were the only factor affecting these figures. However, based on our primary research findings we suggest they made a contribution. Correlation does not here imply a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Analysis did not attempt to control for any changes to entry requirements, or factors operating at University, sector, or national levels.

7.3.1.1 Overview of HEFCE performance indicators

All three institutions' HEFCE Performance Indicators for overall non-continuation between 2007/08 and 2009/10 suggest some success in improving retention with the broadest target groups, although not necessarily with all groups (see Table 5, Appendix I). Whilst Newcastle held steady on retaining mature students (9% non-continuation) it improved somewhat with young students (from 4% to 2%). Sunderland made significant inroads with both mature and young students overall (from 21% to 18% non-continuation, and from 15% to 11%, respectively). Hull's improvements in retaining mature students (from 15% to 13%) were slightly offset by an increase in the non-completion of younger students (from 6% to 7%). Whilst we cannot make a clear causal link between these improved retention figures and the integration-focused activities in this research, we suggest our activities made a contribution.

7.3.1.2 Introduction to localised performance data

Performance data are presented separately for each partner institution. Newcastle University and the University of Sunderland's activities were at course level, and their data reflects this. The University of Hull's activities were not at course level. Differing institutional data management processes meant that different retention-related data sets were available from each partner institution. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Please note:

This evidence is not directly comparable with HEFCE performance indicators. It is reproduced here purely for the purposes of this research, and should not be used or quoted other than within the context of this report.

7.3.2 University of Hull

7.3.2.1 Introduction

The evaluation years saw lower numbers of Social Science students withdraw from their courses.

Section 7.3.2.2 relates to the number of students who withdrew from Social Science Programmes at the University of Hull, not including students who transferred to other institutions. Section 7.3.2.3 relates to students who took part in the Summer School and Welcome Lunch.

Data from the University of Hull were available for the academic years 2007/08 to 2009/10. Figures for 2010/11 refer to data available at the time of writing in June 2011, i.e. for an incomplete academic year.

7.3.2.2 Social Science Programmes

Figure 8 shows that the number of Social Science students who withdrew from their Programme was lower in 2008/09 than in 2007/08, and lower still in 2009/10. Data for 2010/11 (at the time of writing in June 2011) show a lower number of students withdrew in that year.

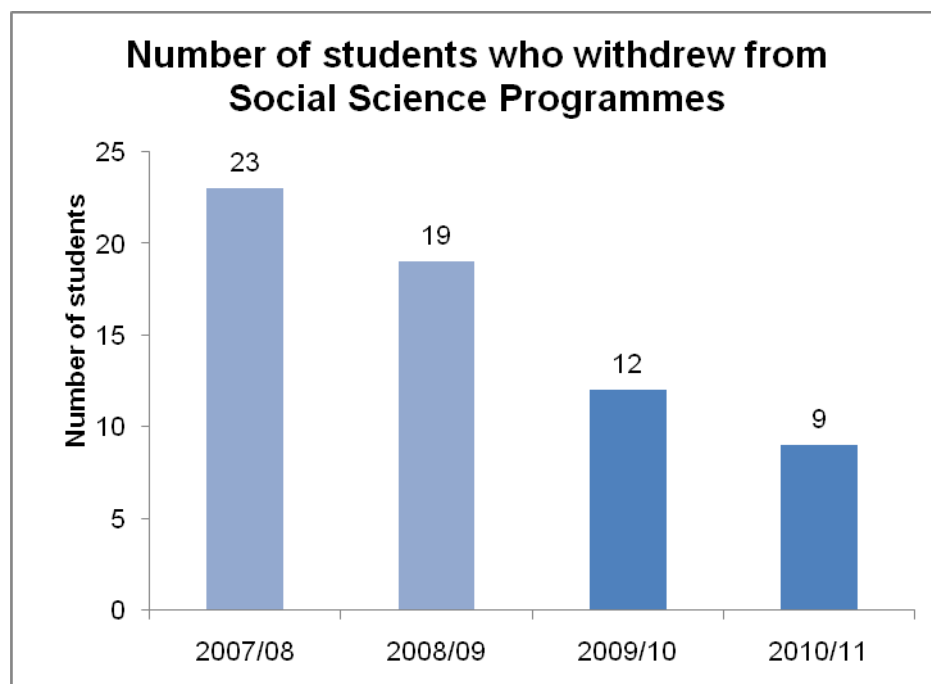


Figure 8: Students who withdrew from Social Science Programmes

The introduction of a new first year pastoral and academic supervision system took place in 2009/10. We suggest that the fall from 19 students who withdrew in 2008/09 to 12 students who withdrew in 2009/10 is positive news, and note that the lower still number of 9 students who withdrew in 2010/11 (at the time of writing in June 2011) is also positive.

Table 9 shows that the majority of students who withdrew from Social Science Programmes each year withdrew at Certificate Stage. We acknowledge that the inclusion of small numbers means these are not representative statistics; they are included as they may be useful in indicating trends.

Stage	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Certificate	20	13	8	9
Diploma	2	2	3	0
Degree	1	4	1	0
Totals	23	19	12	9

Table 9: Students who withdrew from Social Science Programmes (2007/08 to 2010/11) by Stage

Based on our primary research findings we argue that this integration-focused change in supervision arrangements contributed to these lower numbers of Social Science students withdrawing from their Programme. The enhanced supervision arrangements were designed to benefit first year students. As Certificate Stage is the first year of these Social Science Programmes, we suggest it is positive news that our evaluation year saw a lower number of students withdraw at Certificate Stage. That no students had withdrawn at Diploma Stage as at June 2011 is also encouraging: as first years in 2009/10 these students were part of the new supervision system. We suggest that future research could further investigate students' integration, and retention, beyond their first year.

7.3.2.3 Summer School and Welcome Lunch

The available retention data for students who took part in the Summer School and Welcome Lunch is also positive. Over the past three years (2007/08 to 2009/10), between 4% and 6% of new Summer School attendees who subsequently registered and began a programme of study have since withdrawn from the University and are

no longer in HE. Similarly, Welcome Lunch attendees who subsequently registered and began a programme of study were more likely to continue than the general mature student populace, with around 93%³ continuing beyond their first year. These figures, which cover students from programmes across the University, are substantially lower than overall HESA return data for withdrawals of full-time mature and part-time students (Table 5, Appendix I). Based on our primary research findings we suggest that participation in these activities contributed to these higher proportions of students remaining on their Programmes.

7.3.3 Newcastle University

7.3.3.1 Introduction

The evaluation years saw higher percentages of students remaining on the same Programme next year for M&SE and CEAM compared both with *each School's data for the past 5 academic years*, and *other Engineering Schools at Newcastle in the same academic year*.

This section relates to the retention of Stage 1 students and their progression to Stage 2. Newcastle University's measure of *students remaining on the same Programme next year* shows students who satisfied HEFCE's definition of completion, then sat and passed assessment for that year to satisfy Newcastle University's progression requirements, and returned for the next Stage of their Programme.

Data from Newcastle University students were available for the academic years 2005/06 to 2009/10. Data for 2010/11 were not available at the time of writing.

7.3.3.2 Year on year comparison for M&SE

M&SE's integration-focused activities took place in 2008/09 and 2009/10. As the introduction of Engineering Teams was a year-long activity we would expect to see any quantitative impact of this in the following year's retention-related data to allow the activity to become embedded. In 2009/10 M&SE saw 94% of students (100 of the 107 students who had registered) remain on the same Programme next year (Table 10).

³ This figure is reached from analysis of the previous two years' data.

Academic Year	Number of students registered	Percentage of students remaining on the same Programme next year	Number of students remaining on the same Programme next year
2005/06	93	85%	79
2006/07	75	84%	63
2007/08	91	89%	81
2008/09 (intervention year)	114	84%	96
2009/10 (intervention year)	107	94%	100

Table 10: M&SE students remaining on the same Programme next year (2005/06 to 2009/10)

This was the highest percentage and number of students remaining on the same Programme next year in the five academic years for which data were available, and 9 percentage points higher than the previous year (Figure 9; Table 10).

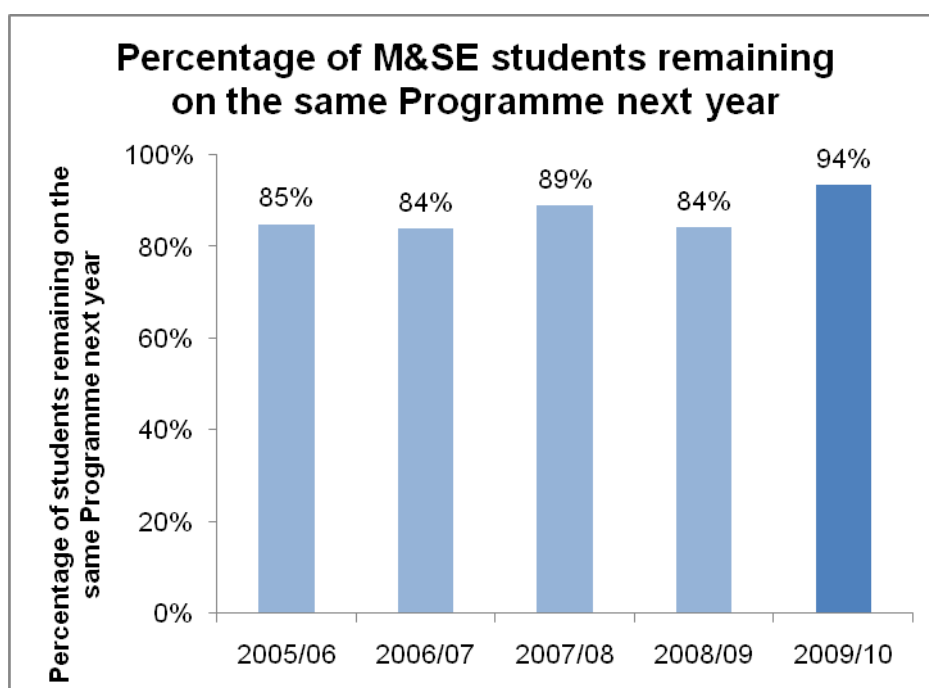


Figure 9: Percentage of M&SE students remaining on the same Programme next year (2005/06 to 2009/10)

7.3.3.3 Year on year comparison for CEAM

CEAM's integration-focused activities took place in 2008/09 and 2009/10. As these activities focused on the first week of the first semester we would expect to see evidence of impact of this in the same year's retention-related data. In 2008/09 CEAM saw 94% of students (49 of the 52 students who registered) remain on the same Programme next year. In 2009/10 CEAM saw 93% of students (69 of the 74 students who had registered) remain on the same Programme next year (Table 11).

Academic Year	Number of students registered	Percentage of students remaining on the same Programme next year	Number of students remaining on the same Programme next year
2005/06	46	89%	41
2006/07	41	85%	35
2007/08	48	75%	36
2008/09 (intervention year)	52	94%	49
2009/10 (intervention year)	74	93%	69

Table 11: CEAM students remaining on the same Programme next year (2005/06 to 2009/10)

These were the highest percentages and numbers of students remaining on the same Programme next year in the five academic years for which data were available (Figure 10).

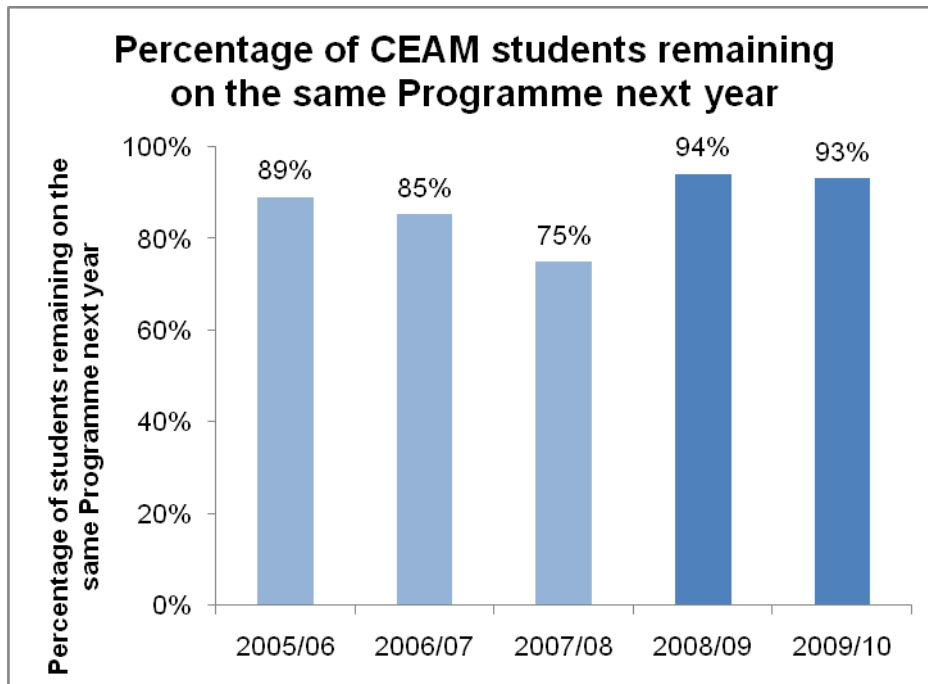


Figure 10: Percentage of CEAM students remaining on the same Programme next year (2005/06 to 2009/10)

Based on our qualitative findings we suggest that the activities evaluated in this project report contributed to these higher proportions of students remaining on the same Programme next year in both Engineering Schools.

7.3.3.4 Evaluation year comparison with other Schools of Engineering

Newcastle University has five Schools of Engineering, which offered a 'natural experiment' to further evaluate the impact of the integration-focused activities of the two Schools (M&SE and CEAM) involved in this research. As the other three Schools were not part of the *What Works?* programme of research they are referred to here as Schools A, B, and C.

Figure 11 uses data from 2009/10 to compare the quantitative impact of both M&SE and CEAM's integration-focused activities with the same data sets from Schools A, B, and C. In 2009/10 CEAM and M&SE had higher percentages of students remaining on the same Programme next year than did the other three Engineering Schools at Newcastle.

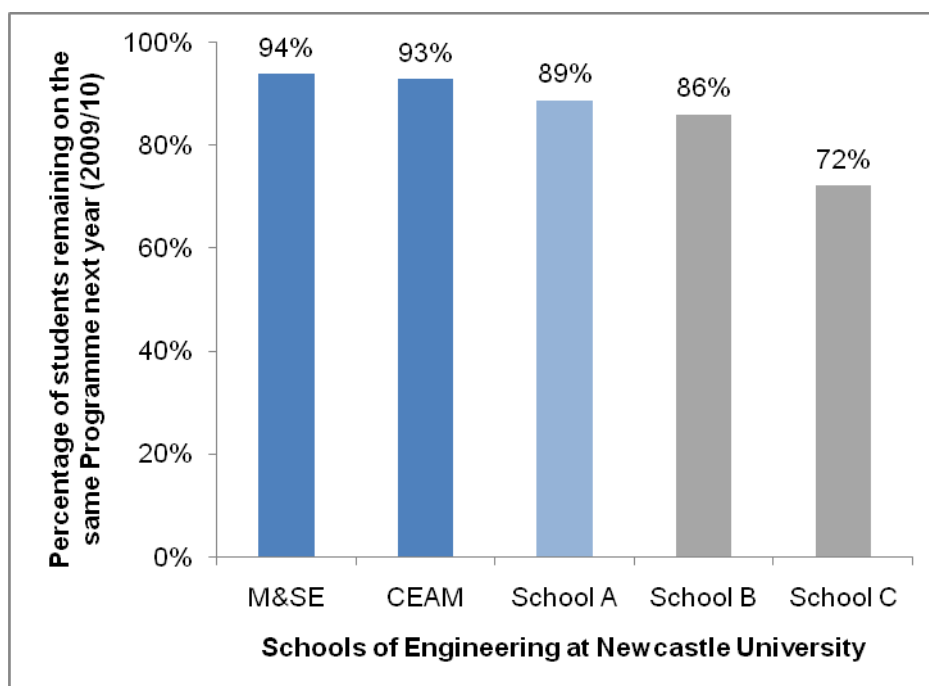


Figure 11: Comparison across five Schools of Engineering of the percentages of students remaining on the same Programme next year (2009/10)

Table 12 includes numbers of students as these differed by School.

School	Number of students registered	Percentage of students remaining on the same Programme next year	Number of students remaining on the same Programme next year
M&SE	107	94%	100
CEAM	74	93%	69
School A	89	89%	79
School B	101	86%	87
School C	54	72%	39

Table 12: Comparison across five Schools of Engineering of the numbers and percentages of students remaining on the same Programme next year (2009/10)

We propose that the activities evaluated in this project report contributed to these higher proportions of students remaining on the same Programme next year in both M&SE and CEAM. The next paragraph offers further evidence to support this proposal.

After M&SE and CEAM, School A had the next highest percentage of students remaining on the same Programme next year. School A had expressed an interest in

taking part in the *What Works?* programme of research to evaluate the enhancement of its own integration-focused activities in 2009/10, but was unable to participate due to other commitments. School A's percentage of students remaining on the same Programme next year was 17 percentage points higher in 2009/10 than in 2008/09, which suggests that the enhancement of School A's integration-focused activities may have contributed to this increase. We suggest that School A's higher percentage of students remaining on the same Programme next year *and* enhanced integration-focused activities in 2009/10 supports our argument that enhanced integration-focused activities can contribute to improved retention rates. This argument treats Schools B and C as 'control' Schools in a natural experiment as we were not aware of any new or enhanced integration-focused activities in these Schools in 2009/10.

7.3.4 University of Sunderland

7.3.4.1 Introduction

The evaluation years saw higher percentages of students retained from Level 1 to Level 2 for Childhood Studies and Psychology compared with each School's data for the past 3 academic years. The percentage of Tourism students retained from Level 1 to Level 2 remained relatively constant over the period of this research.

This section relates to the retention of students from Level 1 to Level 2. Sections 7.3.4.2 to 7.3.4.4 present evidence for all students on these programmes. Sections 7.3.4.5 and 7.3.4.6 focus on students geographically local to Sunderland.

Data from the University of Sunderland were available for the academic years 2007/08 to 2009/10. Data for 2010/11 were not available at the time of writing in June 2011.

7.3.4.2 Year on year comparison for Tourism (all students)

Figure 12 shows that the percentage of Tourism students retained from Level 1 to Level 2 remained relatively constant over the three years of this research. This is perhaps unsurprising as field trips were an integration-focused activity established before the *What Works?* programme, not a new initiative.

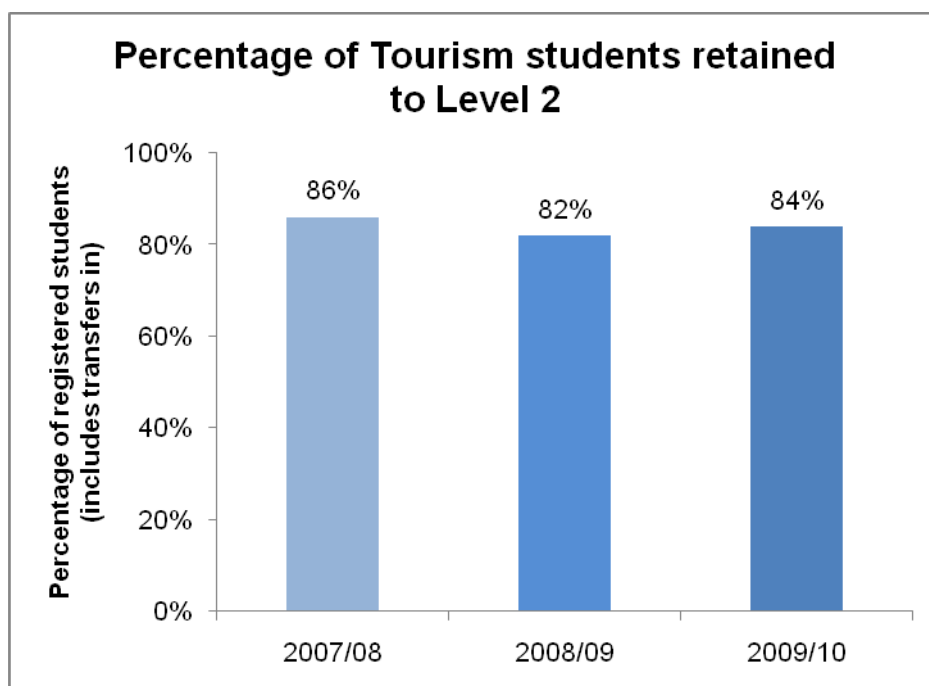


Figure 12: Percentage of Tourism students retained to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10)

It is interesting to note that the percentage of students retained to Level 2 remained constant in 2009/10 although this year had twice as many students registered as in 2007/08 and 2008/09 (Table 13).

Academic Year	Number of students registered	Percentage of students retained to Level 2	Number of students retained to Level 2
2007/08	21	86%	18
2008/09	22	82%	18
2009/10	45	84%	38

Table 13: Tourism students retained to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10)

This could indicate an opportunity for further research into how activities can be adapted for larger or smaller cohorts. However, as student numbers were noticeably smaller than numbers for Psychology and for Childhood Studies, Tourism was excluded from further analyses of local performance data.

7.3.4.3 Year on year comparison for Childhood Studies (all students)

Figure 13 shows that the percentage of Childhood Studies students retained from Level 1 to Level 2 was higher in 2008/09 than in 2007/08, and higher still in 2009/10.

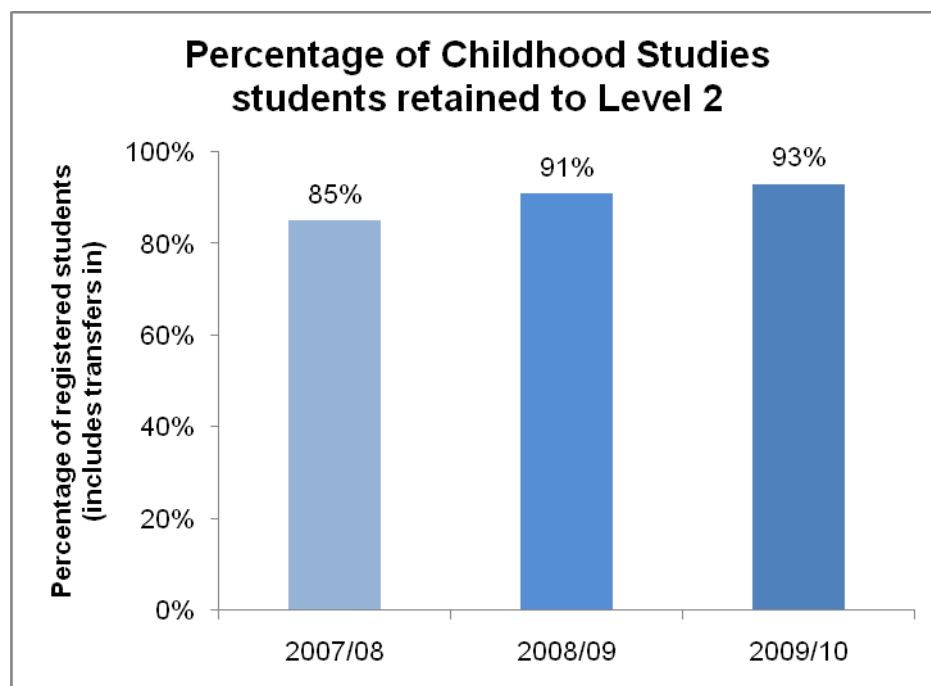


Figure 13: Percentage of Childhood Studies students retained to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10)

Table 14 shows this in numbers of students.

Academic Year	Number of students registered	Percentage of students retained to Level 2	Number of students retained to Level 2
2007/08	99	85%	84
2008/09	117	91%	107
2009/10	120	93%	112

Table 14: Childhood Studies students retained to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10)

2008/09 saw the introduction of the charitable fundraising activities evaluated in this research. Whilst acknowledging that it would be hasty to identify trends based on

three years' data, we suggest that this increase of 8 percentage points is positive news. Based on our primary research evidence we argue that these integration-focused activities contributed to these higher proportions of Childhood Studies students retained to Level 2.

7.3.4.4 Year on year comparison for Psychology (all students)

Figure 14 shows that the percentage of Psychology students retained from Level 1 to Level 2 was higher in 2008/09 than in 2007/08, and higher still in 2009/10.

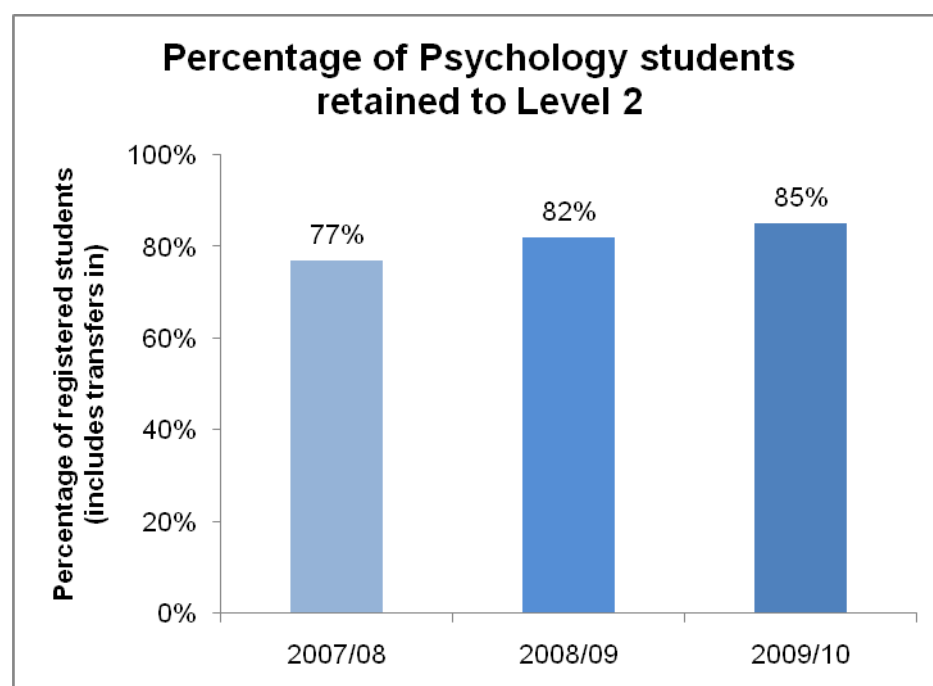


Figure 14: Percentage of Psychology students retained to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10)

Table 15 shows this in numbers of students.

Academic Year	Number of students registered	Percentage of students retained to Level 2	Number of students retained to Level 2
2007/08	102	77%	79
2008/09	142	82%	116
2009/10	87	85%	74

Table 15: Psychology students retained to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10)

2008/09 saw the introduction of the Sandbox Studio evaluated in this research with problem based learning being an ongoing activity. Whilst acknowledging that it would be hasty to identify trends based on three years' data, we suggest that this increase of 8 percentage points is positive news. Based on our qualitative findings we argue that these integration-focused initiatives contributed to these higher proportions of Psychology students retained to Level 2.

7.3.4.5 Comparison by geographic origin of students for Childhood Studies

The following two sections give a more detailed exploration of the retention data for geographically local students.

Students' geographic origins were established from their postcode. 'Sunderland' students were those with a Sunderland postcode who had not changed their address to attend University. 'North East' students were those from the wider North East region. 'Other' students were those from the rest of the UK, the EU, and the rest of the world. Analysis treated these three categories as mutually exclusive. As stated in the institutional context of this report (Section 3.3.3), Sunderland and North East students form the majority of Sunderland University's student intake and this was reflected by intakes for Childhood Studies and for Psychology. In 2008/09 and 2009/10 no Childhood Studies students came from outside the North East.

Table 16 shows that the number of North East students not retained from Level 1 to Level 2 was lower in 2008/09 and 2009/10 than in 2007/08. We acknowledge that the inclusion of small numbers means these are not representative statistics; they are included as they may be useful in indicating trends.

Geographic origin	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Sunderland	4	4	3
North East	9	5	5
Other	2	n/a	n/a
Total	15	9	8

Table 16: Childhood Studies students *not* retained from Level 1 to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10) by geographic origin

This suggests that the benefits of the integration-focused activities (as improved integration, and improved retention) became apparent among North East students. The picture is less clear for Sunderland students. We suggest that these activities supported the integration, and retention, of a broader definition of 'local' students from Sunderland and the wider North East.

It is interesting to note that some Tourism research participants living at home in Sunderland said that they felt students who lived in University Halls (and whose permanent address was outside Sunderland) “had already made friends” whereas they felt left out (Section 7.2.3.2, key message B). This performance data for Childhood Studies students, when read in conjunction with our primary research findings, suggests that it was students living in the wider North East region who benefitted from the integration-focused activities evaluated by this research. This suggests that future research could further investigate the integration of a broader definition of 'local' students from Sunderland and the wider North East.

7.3.4.6 Comparison by geographic origin of students for Psychology

Table 17 shows that the number of Sunderland students not retained from Level 1 to Level 2 was 6 in 2007/08 and fell to 2 in 2008/09 and in 2009/10. The picture is less clear for North East and for Other students: the numbers of these students not retained from Level 1 to Level 2 was lower in 2009/10 than in 2007/08, which is positive news, but were higher in 2008/09. We acknowledge that the inclusion of small numbers means these are not representative statistics; they are included as they may be useful in indicating trends.

Geographic origin	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Sunderland	6	2	2
North East	13	18	8
Other	4	6	3
Total	23	26	13

Table 17: Psychology students *not* retained from Level 1 to Level 2 (2007/08 to 2009/10) by geographic origin

This suggests that the benefits of the integration-focused activities were most clear for Sunderland students. We suggest that these activities supported the integration, and retention, of students from Sunderland in both 2008/09 and 2009/10, and of North East and Other students in 2009/10.

Further to the above discussion for Childhood Studies students, we suggest that use of the integration-focused Sandbox Studio and problem based learning activity, supported the integration, and retention, of a broader definition of 'local' students from Sunderland and the wider North East. Investigation of the benefits felt by Other students was outside the scope of this research but could be pursued in future research.

7.3.5 Summary of evidence from performance data

This section gave evidence that fewer students withdrew from our areas of focus in our evaluation years than in previous years, suggesting that the integration-focused activities in this research contributed to the retention of more students. Particularly positive news was presented for the retention of local (Sunderland and North East) students at the University of Sunderland, first year students at the University of Hull, and students in both Schools of Engineering at Newcastle University.

The next section draws together findings from our primary research and performance data analyses to answer our research question.

7.4 Synthesis of Primary research findings and Performance Data analyses

Primary research evidence showed that students expected and focused on academic activities, and activities that combined social opportunities with an academic context, as important in making them feel part of the University community and in helping them continue with their degree programme when they felt like withdrawing. We also showed that students valued the integration-focused activities evaluated in this research.

Analyses of performance data showed that fewer students withdrew from our areas of focus in our evaluation years than in previous years. We acknowledge that our analyses did not attempt to control for any changes to entry requirements, or for factors operating at institution, sector, or national levels. It would be simplistic to

argue that the integration-focused activities evaluated in this research were the only factor affecting these figures. Based on our findings, we suggest they made a contribution.

The research question underpinning our collaborative study was:

Does a student's sense of integration support their retention?

Based on our evidence we suggest that these integration-focused activities can help students integrate with their peers, and with their School and university communities. We suggest that students who are integrated are more likely to persist with their courses, which may have a positive impact on their retention.

The next section considers the implications of our findings.

8 Concluding sections

8.1 Implications

This section shows the specific implications of each of our key findings and locates these within the current fluid HE context.

The finding which over-arches all others is that when social and academic aspects of integration are both targeted they support and enhance each other. All the student groups in our study said that they were primarily motivated by their goals and highly prized their academic experience in moving towards these. It became apparent that when students worked together formally or informally on academic projects they developed peer bonds which then led to a high degree of social integration. This social interaction was something that many had dismissed as unimportant initially but came to value through this process. We also found that when students were facilitated by staff in developing strong social bonds this, in turn, led to academic collaboration and enhanced learning.

The three key implications of these findings were that:

- Acceptance of the concept that social and academic integration are reliant upon each other for their fullest effect offers the opportunity for comprehensive institutional strategies for retention
- That the provision of School and institutional support and encouragement for the key role played by academic staff in student integration is essential. Academic staff have a key role to play in providing students with a sense of structure within an academic environment in which social interaction with students and staff is facilitated
- Adoption of a student-centred, collaborative team or group approach to learning may require substantial reorganisation of the learning environment including changes in pedagogical practice, assessment and student supervision. This may also require School and institutional support.

We will now consider in more detail these implications and our headline recommendations related to them. Detailed and stepped recommendations are included in Appendix III as tools for wider dissemination and use.

8.1.1 Implication 1: Acceptance of the concept that social and academic integration are reliant upon each other for their fullest effect offers the opportunity for comprehensive institutional strategies for retention.

In addition to the inclusion of the findings from our collaborative project within the *What Works?* dissemination process, each partner institution will have an internal dissemination programme. In addition, bringing the findings of our study to the wider HE community will be achieved through publications and conference papers as a means of promoting this understanding amongst a wider HE audience.

8.1.2 Implication 2: That the provision of School and institutional support and encouragement for the key role played by academic staff in student integration is essential. Academic staff have a key role to play in providing students with a sense of structure within an academic environment in which social interaction with students and staff is facilitated.

The following are offered as additional, detailed, reflections on this implication based on our research findings:

1. It is necessary to develop an understanding at Programme/School/Institutional levels of the transitional needs for direction and structure for the majority of students. It is important to develop an awareness that this represents a temporary strategic measure at the point of entry and initial transition to HE.
2. Acceptance of this need will offer opportunities for the development of subject-, Programme- or student group-specific events or activities to provide a sense of structure. The form and content of the activity or event will be most effective if chosen from an understanding of the background and culture of the majority of students.
3. It is important to maintain awareness of the specific needs of sub-groups within the larger student group. This allows for the inclusion of subtle changes to enhance opportunities for inclusion of groups at risk of marginalisation.

Part-time students, mature students, and mature students who study part-time may require special consideration of the timing of events and activities to accommodate their employment or caring commitments.

4. Consideration should be given to providing local and mature students with opportunities for peer group interaction in a context within which they are able to recognise academic benefits for themselves in investing academically and socially with peers.
5. At degree programme level it will be necessary to develop shared understandings between academic and other staff about the need to act in a unified (Programme-specific) way to promote interaction between students in a manner which enhances their sense of continuity, security and purpose.
6. Practical implications related to the event or activity will require specific consideration, for example finding space within a crowded induction timetable, an appropriate physical space and also the provision of financial and other resources.

Further reflections on bringing about these enhancements are offered in our stepped recommendations (Appendix III).

8.1.3 Implication 3: Adoption of a student-centred, collaborative team or group approach to learning may require substantial reorganisation of the learning environment including changes in pedagogical practice, assessment and student supervision. This may also require School and Institutional support.

The concept of collaborative working is far from new and there is a substantial body of literature on the subject of the benefits of collaborative learning environments (Kuh *et al.*, 2006; Zepke and Leach, 2010) and an understanding that “learning occurs in social contexts” (Hughes, 2009).

It is acknowledged that there are potential challenges which may be encountered when learning is organised around team/group approaches. Suggestions from our research for pre-empting and minimising the occurrence of these are included in this section.

The following are offered as additional, detailed, reflections on this implication based on our research findings. Detailed and stepped recommendations are included in Appendix III.

1. It will be necessary for consideration to be given at subject and degree programme level to the type of group work or teamwork which is most appropriate in the context of a given degree programme, and how the chosen approach is to be integrated with existing pedagogies and teaching strategies.
2. Group and team integration carries specific implications for any student group who may view themselves or be viewed by others as 'different'. The implication at subject, Programme and module level is a need to develop an awareness of the existence of any groups at risk of marginalisation. The development of agreed strategies which target these students' additional integration needs throughout induction processes, and as they navigate their way through the complexities of team formation and functioning, may be necessary.
3. Transition to the use of a team/group approach may require additional staff time and resources in the preparation and adaptation of course materials and assessments.
4. In moving to a team/group approach there are implications at both module and School level in developing a core strategy which can be consistently applied to how teams/groups achieve support and how difficulties in team dynamics or functioning may be supported without compromising these students' development of self-regulatory skills.

8.1.4 The role of the institution in supporting and facilitating staff in their work of engaging students and promoting their academic and social integration.

Although this issue is not one of our key findings it is important to consider the role of structures within the institution in facilitating change. Members of academic and other staff interviewed as part of our study noted the necessity of receiving sanction and encouragement at institution and degree programme level to proceed with their proposed initiatives.

The ability of organisations to be even-handed in implicitly and explicitly valuing both excellence in research and teaching will transmit a clear message to academic staff about priorities and how they should allocate the scarce resource of their time. Those with academic, social and economic power within a university have the ability to define the discourses which are privileged within that organisation and which determine the organisational culture (Campbell, 2000). The 2011 Education White Paper 'Students at the Heart of the System' has put considerable emphasis on universities being able to deliver an enhanced student experience and this encouragement will also play a part in defining institutional priorities.

In our study the staff and academics who undertook or evaluated measures to increase student integration were enthusiastic and prepared to actively intervene in challenging boundaries and forging links. They were all to some extent 'special'. They were prepared to go above and beyond their roles in the service of their students and may not be representative of the whole academic community.

Staff participants in our mid-point evaluation made comments about their relative ability or inability to influence their students' learning environment. One spoke of colleagues' scepticism about new pedagogical practice and also commented that:

"I think to be brutally honest, most of the staff here feel overworked and overburdened and they have got enough to do anyway without even making those changes or even thinking about them."

Being in a position of academic power was also commented upon by a senior academic in another University:

"When I first floated the idea I was prepared for a lot of obvious unease about it, if not resistance. I think I benefitted from two things – one I was very new here and two that I have a senior position.....whether I would get away with it next year or two years time now that they know me better is another matter entirely but, no, everyone was very, very supportive!"

The use of students as monitors of the teaching performance of new academics in the US (Mroz 2011, p.5) suggests a move towards according a higher value to the voice of the student body. Students within this study told us about the things which helped them to gain a sense of integration. They noted not only the interlinking between their academic and their social experiences but also the importance of staff in facilitating this.

The implications which arise from our key findings are multi-layered and range from suggestions for simple, cost-effective, integration-focused strategies to the reorganisation of degree programmes to accommodate team or group working, where these do not already exist. The role of the institution in recognising the need for changes which further support student integration, and in offering implicit and explicit support to staff, is perhaps the most fundamental of our recommendations.

8.2 Conclusions

The challenge for the three partner institutions working collaboratively within this project has been to achieve the research objective described by the Hungarian Nobel Prize winning biochemist, Albert von Szent-Györgyi: that “discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought” (cited in Morse 1995). Our challenge has been to uncover the unusual within the frequently observed and everyday events.

We began our study with the research question ‘Does a student’s sense of integration support their retention?’. We evaluated new and existing integration-related activities and interventions with students across our three partner institutions using a predominantly qualitative methodology. Through surveys, individual and focus group interviews and post-event feedback we gathered the views and perspectives of groups of students with widely differing characteristics about those things that had helped them to gain a sense of integration, both social and academic, and whether specific integration-related events or initiatives had been part of this.

From the survey carried out across all three partner institutions at the start of our research we learned that for the majority of students, their academic experience was held to be of primary importance. Their responses also showed us that approximately a third had entertained some thoughts of withdrawing from their degree programme during their first year.

Analysis of our research findings revealed the following four key themes:

- A Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community
- B Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose

- C Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities
- D Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum.

8.2.1 Limitations of this research

We are aware that, because of the difficulty in recruiting students prepared to be followed up longitudinally throughout their university career at the outset of the research; two partner institutions (Sunderland and Newcastle) were reliant on recruiting focus group and other interview participants through their Programmes. We were not able to make direct links between the integration and retention of specific students although the indication from both our primary research evidence and analyses of performance data relating to specific programmes suggests this. As the main focus for evaluation at Hull was to follow up mature students across Programmes who had attended pre-course events, it was possible to obtain feedback from two cohorts of students and to study the numbers who were retained.

It must also be acknowledged that course and university level factors may also have influenced students' persistence with their courses. These include students' qualifications on entry and their (perceptions of) employment prospects on graduation. Another factor is students' willingness to amass debt in an economic climate that changed substantially over the three years of the study (2008/09 to 2010/11).

Our findings showed that our integration-focused activities were positively received by students consistently across groups. It is important to acknowledge that the effect of being studied may have had some impact upon students' responses.

As discussed in Section 3.4 (The changing context of HE), changing arrangements for student finance could affect students' expectations of their university experience. If this is the case then students' integration with the University may gain even greater significance as a route to student satisfaction, retention, and success.

8.2.2 The effect of our institutional collaboration

Taking part in the *What Works? Student retention and success* programme has afforded all three partner institutions an opportunity to share knowledge and good practice. Being able to work together has widened each of our understandings about what helps and what hinders student integration, and the effect this then has upon the likelihood of diverse groups of students completing their degree programme in each of our three institutions. Feedback from academic staff and others involved directly with students showed that this was a generative experience for them too. The project represented a period of time when institutional and personal links were forged and it is hoped that these will endure and that they will offer opportunities for further collaboration.

8.2.3 Opportunities for further research and hopes for the future

Opportunities exist for each partner institution to disseminate their individual findings within their own institution, and for all three partners to disseminate more widely through publication and in conference papers, including the *What Works?* programme-wide conference in 2012.

Further research which considers the effect on student integration of the changes in the HE sector both in terms of the number of students who persist but also their qualitative experience could be a natural and complementary addition to work completed by our partnership.

When a student is integrated into their degree programme it is, as a student Engineer suggests in this final quote, more than anything else about being connected to others:

“...this year on the course a lot of it has been about working in a group, working with people, I have not so much necessarily worked solely on my own...for a few things I have.. I feel it is very group based... like a family sort of thing...”

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10 Appendices

10.1 Appendix I: Institutional profiles (HESA data) and Summary of key performance indicators for non-continuation (HEFCE data)

Tables 1 to 4 below use published HESA data to give a snapshot of the institutional student profiles of the three Universities involved in this research, and are presented with a brief commentary. Table 5 gives HEFCE Performance Indicator (PI) data of performance against benchmarks for non continuation for each of the three institutions, and is again presented with a brief commentary.

Please note that HESA does not accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties. All data is rounded to the nearest 5 in accordance with the HESA rounding methodology. Inconsistencies in totals between the tables are due to this rounding.

HEFCE notes that PI by institution is calculated on those students who are no longer in HE. PI data at this institutional level may not reflect performance at programme level.

HESA data: Tables 1 to 4

The University of Hull had over 23,000 students registered in 2009/10, up by 8% from 2005/6, with the increase being mainly in full-time and sandwich students at undergraduate level. The proportion of Hull's students who study part-time or other fell from almost half (46%) of the total population in 2005/6 to 37% in 2009/10. The majority of Hull's students are UK domiciled (85% in 2009/10) and in the same year 61% were aged 21 or over (classed as mature students). Hull's research thus focused on students who were part-time and/or mature undergraduates.

Newcastle University had 20,250 students registered in 2009/10, up 6% from 2005/6, with increasing proportions being full-time and sandwich year students (91% in 2009/10). The proportion of UK domiciled students fell slightly (from 80% to 78%) with a corresponding increase in EU students (excluding UK) and international students. The involvement of two of Newcastle University's Schools of Engineering in this research stemmed from concern at national rates of non-continuation for Engineering students with students in their first year of Engineering degree programmes considered particularly vulnerable to non-continuation, as discussed in Section 3.3.2. Engineering students involved in this study were full-time undergraduates and included some international (EU and non-EU) students.

The University of Sunderland registered 18,930 students in 2009/10, a fall of 7% overall from 2005/6, principally due to a decline in part-time students over a period when full-time and sandwich year student numbers increased. The majority (85%) of Sunderland students in 2009/10 were undergraduates. The proportion of UK domiciled students increased from 70% to 77% between 2005/6 and 2009/10, and most (70%) were mature students in the latest year for which data were available. Sunderland's research focused on local undergraduate students, many of whom were mature (aged 21 or over).

Level of Study (All Students, Headcount)							Change 2005/06 to 2009/10	
Institution	Level of Study	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Number	%
University of Hull	Undergraduate	17,310	18,710	18,315	19,045	19,700	2,390	14%
	Postgraduate Taught	3,125	2,575	2,160	2,660	2,800	-325	-10%
	Postgraduate Research	1,000	985	530	665	575	-425	-43%
	University of Hull Total	21,435	22,270	21,005	22,370	23,075	1,640	8%
Newcastle University	Undergraduate	13,735	14,060	14,385	14,415	14,590	855	6%
	Postgraduate Taught	2,870	3,005	2,845	3,345	3,875	1,005	35%
	Postgraduate Research	2,540	2,635	1,825	1,815	1,785	-755	-30%
	Newcastle University Total	19,145	19,700	19,055	19,575	20,250	1,105	6%
University of Sunderland	Undergraduate	17,330	17,020	15,045	17,160	16,085	-1,245	-7%
	Postgraduate Taught	2,815	2,925	2,430	2,680	2,620	-195	-7%
	Postgraduate Research	220	270	235	190	225	5	2%
	University of Sunderland Total	20,365	20,215	17,710	20,030	18,930	-1,435	-7%

Table 1: Level of Study (All Students, Headcount). Source: HESA.

Mode of Study (All Students, Headcount)							Change 2005/06 to 2009/10	
Institution	Mode of Study	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Number	%
University of Hull	Full-time & Sandwich	11,660	12,010	12,635	13,610	14,540	2,880	25%
	Part-time & Other	9,770	10,265	8,370	8,760	8,535	-1,235	-13%
	University of Hull Total	21,430	22,275	21,005	22,370	23,075	1,645	8%
Newcastle University	Full-time & Sandwich	17,065	17,410	17,470	18,015	18,500	1,435	8%
	Part-time & Other	2,080	2,295	1,580	1,555	1,755	-325	-16%
	Newcastle University Total	19,145	19,705	19,050	19,570	20,255	1,110	6%
University of Sunderland	Full-time & Sandwich	9,595	9,815	9,120	10,195	10,730	1,135	12%
	Part-time & Other	10,770	10,400	8,585	9,835	8,200	-2,570	-24%
	University of Sunderland Total	20,365	20,215	17,705	20,030	18,930	-1,435	-7%

Table 2: Mode of Study (All Students, Headcount). Source: HESA.

Area of Domicile (All Students, Headcount)							Change 2005/06 to 2009/10	
Institution	Domicile	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	Number	%
University of Hull	UK	18,530	19,320	18,420	19,300	19,495	965	5%
	EU	745	800	705	835	990	245	33%
	non EU	2,155	2,155	1,880	2,235	2,585	430	20%
	University of Hull Total	21,430	22,275	21,005	22,370	23,070	1,640	8%
Newcastle University	UK	15,380	15,985	15,590	15,575	15,770	390	3%
	EU	955	945	930	935	975	20	2%
	non EU	2,815	2,770	2,535	3,065	3,505	690	25%
	Newcastle University Total	19,150	19,700	19,055	19,575	20,250	1,100	6%
University of Sunderland	UK	16,250	15,950	14,530	16,200	14,580	-1,670	-10%
	EU	885	860	705	715	745	-140	-16%
	non EU	3,230	3,405	2,470	3,120	3,605	375	12%
	University of Sunderland Total	20,365	20,215	17,705	20,035	18,930	-1,435	-7%

Table 3: Area of Domicile (All Students, Headcount). Source: HESA.

Institution	Age band	2009/10
University of Hull	Under 21	8,855
	21 and over	14,050
	Not Known	170
	University of Hull Total	23,075
Newcastle University	Under 21	10,050
	21 and over	10,200
	Not Known	0
	Newcastle University Total	20,250
University of Sunderland	Under 21	5,665
	21 and over	13,240
	Not Known	20
	University of Sunderland Total	18,930

Table 4: Age at the start of the 2009/10 academic year. Source: HESA.

HEFCE Performance Indicators: Table 5

Table 5 provides HEFCE Performance Indicator (PI) data of performance against institutional benchmarks for non continuation following year of entry for each of the three institutions.

This was taken from HEFCE's PI Table 3a which focuses on full-time first degree entrants. It shows the proportion of students who, having started their studies in a given academic year, do not enrol to the successive academic year despite being expected to do so.

The data shows that all three partner institutions have seen an improvement in one or more areas of non-continuation for full-time first degree students. Hull improved in non-continuation of mature students, a target group of this research. Newcastle improved for young students, again a target group. Sunderland showed an improvement for both young and mature students, although there were still challenges meeting benchmarks.

Measure	Institution	2009/10 (2008/09 entrants)		2008/09 (2007/08 entrants)		2007/08 (2006/07 entrants)	
		PI *	Benchmark	PI *	Benchmark	PI *	Benchmark
% of young entrants not in HE	University of Hull	7.0%	6.9%	6.7%	7.3%	6.0%	7.7%
	Newcastle University	2.5%	3.7%	3.3%	4.5%	4.0%	4.5%
	University of Sunderland	10.9%	9.3%	10.4%	9.7%	14.9%	10.2%
% of mature entrants not in HE	University of Hull	12.8%	13.4%	13.3%	14.0%	14.6%	14.3%
	Newcastle University	9.3%	10.2%	9.0%	10.6%	9.3%	11.3%
	University of Sunderland	18.4%	14.2%	20.8%	15.6%	21.5%	15.5%
% of all entrants not in HE	University of Hull	8.2%	8.3%	8.0%	8.6%	7.8%	9.0%
	Newcastle University	3.1%	4.3%	3.7%	5.0%	4.4%	5.0%
	University of Sunderland	13.3%	10.9%	14.0%	11.7%	16.8%	11.8%

Table 5: HEFCE PIs (* Performance Indicators) 2007/08 to 2009/10 for Non-continuation following year of entry.

10.2 Appendix II: sample research instruments

This appendix gives:

- a. the collaborative questionnaire used in our year 1 collaborative survey
- b. a sample group interview schedule (University of Hull)
- c. a sample questionnaire (Newcastle University)
- d. a sample in-depth interview schedule (University of Sunderland).

a. Collaborative survey: research instrument

This questionnaire was developed as an online survey. This is a paper copy of the questions used.

Being a Student - Integration into University

The Universities of Sunderland, Hull and Newcastle are participating in a national research project to establish which factors help students to feel integrated into their degree programmes and universities and what factors hinder this integration.

We are conducting a survey with groups of students at each of the three universities, and as you are a student in your first year at Newcastle you are invited to take part.

The results of this survey will not only inform how well this University supports students, but your feedback will also contribute to national work to help new students better adapt to university life. Your individual responses will remain anonymous and will be treated confidentially in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Responses will be analysed by QuILT, a central unit at Newcastle University, and no personal data will be made available to your School or Faculty.

At the end of the survey we are asking for volunteers to be involved further to help us understand better how to support students at University. We need students who would be willing to talk to a researcher about their student experience a few times over the next 2 years – complete the relevant section if you would like to know more. Also don't forget to tick the box if you wish to enter the Newcastle prize draw.

Our findings will be shared with organisations that make decisions about Higher Education, including the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Therefore your participation will really make a difference, and we are very grateful to you.

If you have any questions you can contact us by email at [email address].

All fields marked * are mandatory.

Section 1: This section asks about where you live during term time, how you get to University and what responsibilities you have.

1. Accommodation - where do you live during university term time? *

- University of Newcastle accommodation
- At home
- Private rented accommodation
- Other

If you answered 'Other' please give details.

2. Who do you live with? (choose as many as apply) *

- Nobody
- Other students
- Parent(s)
- Partner
- Children
- Other family
- Other

If you answered 'Other' please give details.

3. If you live with other students are these students on the same course as you? *

- Yes, all on my course
- Some are on my course
- No, none on my course
- Don't live with other students

4. How far is your term time address from where you (usually) study at University?
Please give approximate number of miles.

5. How do you usually travel to University? (select all that apply) *

- On foot
- Car
- Bus
- Cycle
- Train
- Metro
- Motorbike

6. How long does your journey usually take you ONE way to University? (in minutes)

7. As well as being a student, are you also employed? (tick all that apply) *

- Yes, in paid employment (go to Q8)
- Yes, work voluntarily (go to Q9)
- No (go to Q9)

8. If you are in paid employment please indicate the number of hours per week you usually work.

- 0-10 hours
- 11-15 hours
- 16-20 hours
- 21-25 hours
- 25+ hours

9. Do you act as a carer for anyone e.g. children, other relative? *

- Yes (go to Q10)
- No (go to Section 2)

10. If you care for a child / children, how many dependent children (living at home and still in school / college) do you have? (please state the number of children)

Section 2: This section asks you about activities both within and outside your university course

11. How many hours a week contact time do you have on your course? *

(i.e. timetabled hours for attending lectures, seminars etc.)

12. Which of the following best describes your attendance on timetabled course activities (including lectures, seminars, tutorials, laboratory sessions)? Select one only. *

- I attend all
- I attend at least three-quarters
- I attend more than half
- I attend less than half

13. If you have any difficulty attending your timetabled course activities, please explain here:

14. Which of the following OTHER course related activities do you take part in? Select all that apply.

- Non timetabled group study Field trips
- Individual additional study
- Additional study support (e.g. support from MathsAid or the Writing Centre)

- Meeting(s) with personal tutor
- Am a student representative
- Other, please give brief details below

14a. Other course related activities you have taken part in.

15. If you have any difficulty attending OTHER course related activities, please explain here.

16. What other activities do you regularly get involved in outside of University life and paid employment (e.g. hobbies, social activities)?

Section 3: About how much you feel you are part of the University Community

17. How important to you is feeling involved in the University community? *

- Very important
- Quite important
- Not that important
- Not important at all

18. To what extent do you get involved in the following aspects of social life at the University? Use the drop-down menus to choose *Regularly*, *Occasionally* or *Never* for each question.

- Student Union bar / nightclub * Regularly Occasionally Never
- Clubs and societies * Regularly Occasionally Never
- Chaplaincy * Regularly Occasionally Never
- Volunteering * Regularly Occasionally Never
- Work for University or Union (e.g. Student Ambassador)* Regularly Occasionally Never
- Attending public events / seminars * Regularly Occasionally Never
- Other (Please give details below) * Regularly Occasionally Never

If you take part in other University social activities please give details

19a. To what extent has your ACADEMIC experience at University met your expectations? *

- Fully meets expectations
- Mostly meets expectations
- Meets some expectations
- Does not meet expectations at all

19b. To what extent has your SOCIAL experience at University met your expectations? *

- Fully meets expectations
- Mostly meets expectations
- Meets some expectations
- Does not meet expectations at all

19c. Please explain your answers

Academic Experience

Social Experience

20. How important are your academic and social experiences in making you feel part of the University Community?

- Academic Experience - scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is very important and 5 is very unimportant. * 1 - Very Important 2 3 4 5 - Very Unimportant
- Social Experience - scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is very important and 5 is very unimportant. * 1 - Very Important 2 3 4 5 - Very Unimportant

21. Please explain your answer to Q20 if you wish.

22. To what extent do you think you were prepared for University life before you started your current course? *

- Fully prepared, knew what to expect
- Partially prepared
- Not prepared at all

23. If there is any way you could have been more prepared for University life please explain here.

24. Which of the following have helped you continue with your current degree programme so far? (tick all that apply) *

- Social life at university
- Enjoy the degree programme
- Employment prospects
- Friends outside university
- Friends at university
- Self determination
- Pressure from parents / family
- Family support
- Academic support at university
- Personal tutor / supervisor
- Non academic support in university
- Other

If you answered 'Other' please give details

25. Of the list above, which are the most important for helping you stay on your degree programme? Choose up to 3 in order of importance, where 1 = most important.

- 1 (most important) Social life at university Enjoy the degree programme Employment prospects Friends outside university Friends at university Self determination Pressure from parents / family Family support / management Academic support at university Personal tutor / supervisor Non academic support in university Other
- 2 Social life at university Enjoy the degree programme Employment prospects Friends outside university Friends at university Self determination Pressure from parents / family Family support / management Academic support at university Personal tutor / supervisor Non academic support in university Other
- 3 Social life at university Enjoy the degree programme Employment prospects Friends outside university Friends at university Self determination Pressure from parents / family Family support / management Academic support at university Personal tutor / supervisor Non academic support in university Other

26. Please explain your answers to Q25 here if you wish.

27. Have you ever felt like withdrawing from your current degree programme? *

- Yes (go to Q28)
- No (go to Q29)

28. If Yes what factors helped you to stay on your degree programme?

29. Who would you advise other students to talk to if they were thinking of withdrawing from their degree programme?

Section 4: Information about you

Please note that answers you give to this section will be separated from the rest of the questionnaire results so that only the staff analysing the answers will have access to them, they will not be given to your School, Department or Faculty.

Gender *

- Male
- Female

Age

Mode of study *

- Full-time
- Part-time

What is the name of the degree programme you are registered on currently?

Did you take part in the PARTNERS Programme?

- Yes
- No

Did you undertake a Foundation Programme/Degree before coming to Newcastle University?

- Yes
- No

Have you transferred from one degree to another since starting at university? *

- Yes, please see next question
- No

If you answered yes, what was the name of your original degree?

Do you wish to enter the prize draw for the chance to win one of four £25 Waterstones vouchers? *

- Yes
- No

If you wish to enter the prize draw please provide us with your name, email address and phone number.

Section 5: Participation in National Research Project

The Universities of Hull, Newcastle and Sunderland are working together on a national research project looking at how students settle into university life. We are seeking volunteers to be involved over the next two years.

Please tick below if you are interested. We will send you more information about incentives and time requirements (which will be kept to a minimum) *

- Yes, I would like to volunteer
- I would like to know more before I decide
- No, I'm not interested

If you answered yes or would like to know more, please let us have your name

- First name/Last name
- your University email address
- and phone number

How would you like us to contact you?

- by email
- by phone

Data Protection Statement: Data collected from this survey will be used by the Universities of Sunderland, Newcastle and Hull to identify good practice in helping students settle into University. Individuals participating in this research will not be identified; results and anonymised quotations will be collated into reports and presentations for dissemination across the higher education sector.

b. University of Hull: sample research instrument

This is an example of a group interview schedule used in this research.

1. Introductions and thanks for attending

2. Background and aims of project in general:

The project seeks to:

- evaluate the extent to which a student's integration or lack of integration impacts upon retention across three institutions
- focus on different student groups across the three institutions including mature students (Hull), engineering students (Newcastle) and local students (Sunderland)
- audit current effective practice and research, before moving on to examine student-related activities with the student base and evaluate the impact of initiatives on tracked students' sense of integration.

3. Role of facilitator & explanation of recording, anonymity, attributions and consultation(s)

4. Introductions for recording; first name, where you are from, and course of study.

5. How many:

a. have kids/care responsibilities?

b. work part-time or full-time?

c. are from the local area?

d. are the first in family to enter HE?

6. First topic: General reflections on the University experience: (data: ac.exp. 70% most/full meet expectations, and 78% say ac. exp. important in integrating; soc.exp. 58.1% most/full meet expectation, only 12.9% dissatisfied)

Nudges:

a. Expectations vs realities: what things met expectations? what did not? Consensus of opinion? Differences?

b. Becoming part of the University? Easy? Difficult?

c. Academic successes and difficulties?

d. Social elements? Outside? Clubs, societies, friends, accessing?

e. How important are these elements?

7. Second topic: Preparation for university: (data: 56.5% partially prepared; 35.5% fully prepared)

Nudges:

a. Who felt prepared before they started? And, once started?

b. What kinds of things/agencies helped you prepare?

c. Anyone find it easier than expected?

8. Third topic: Withdrawing and continuing (data: 38.7% considered withdrawing; most helpful in staying : 'self-determination' 87%, 'course enjoyment' 77%, uni friends 71%, employment prospects 63%, family support 61%; least helpful: 'non-academic support' 8%, 'social life at uni' 24%, 'personal tutor/supervisor' 33%, uni academic support 42%, outside uni friends 47%)

Nudges:

a. Anyone thought about leaving? Reasons? Times?

b. To what extent? Serious? Started process? Just a bad day?

c. To whom do you express doubts? Within uni? Outwith?

d. Things that help you continue? Within? Outwith?

e. Anyone know another who left early?

9. Lastly: final thoughts. Anything important we haven't discussed?

10. Final words:

Many thanks for coming and providing a frank and honest discussion. The data from this session will be analysed with a view to discussing certain aspects with you in more detail in one-to-one interviews in the near future. This is to both explore the issues more deeply, and confirm the analysis is not misrepresentative. You may contact Kenny Archibald about this project via email (kenny.archibald@hull.ac.uk) with any questions or concerns you may have. Again, thanks (now let's get some lunch!)

c. Newcastle University: sample research instrument

This questionnaire was developed as an online survey. This is a paper copy of the questions used.

Being part of an Engineering Team

Please tell us about your experience of being part of an 'Engineering Team'. All fields marked * are mandatory.

Part 1

Q1. I enjoy working as part of an 'Engineering Team' *

Please select your response from the drop down menu below:

- Enjoy very much
- Enjoy somewhat
- Neither enjoy nor not enjoy
- Some doubts about the system
- Do not enjoy at all

Q2. I have gained new skills from working with others in the team *

Please select the response which is most appropriate for you:

- Yes
- No

Q2. We are encouraged to sit together as a team in lectures/seminars *

Please select the option which reflects your experience:

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

Q3. We are encouraged to work together as a team during lectures/seminars *

Please select the option which reflects your experience:

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

Q4. As part of a team I feel more confident in interacting with the Lecturer/Tutor *

Please click on the response which most accurately reflects your experience:

- Yes
- No

Q5. Our team meet up outside of the University *

Please select the option which matches your experience:

- Yes
- No

Q6. Being part of the team has helped me to feel that I belong in this School *

Please select the option which most accurately reflects your feelings:

- Yes
- No

Q7. Please add any other comments about your experience of being part of a team

Part 2

This next part is about you.

Q8. Please tell us whether you are *

- Male
- Female

Q9. How old are you? *

Q10. Where do you live whilst you are at university? *

- University hall of residence
- Shared University house/flat
- Private rented house/flat
- Own house/flat
- With parents/family

Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. Your effort is very much appreciated

Data Protection Statement: Data collected from this survey will be used by the School of Mechanical and Systems Engineering and the Department of Quality in Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University to monitor the introduction of Engineering Teams. Individuals participating in this research will not be identified; results and anonymised quotations may be collated into reports and presentations for dissemination across the Higher Education sector.

d. University of Sunderland: sample research instrument

This is an example of an in-depth interview schedule used in this research.

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and independent research company
- Here to discuss your 'sense of belonging' at the University of Sunderland as a local student
- The interview will be recorded - then typed up to look at ideas and themes
- Confidential – your name won't be identified in any findings
- We want to hear your thoughts – there are no right or wrong answers
- The interview will be conducted in accordance with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct

For the recorder please could you state your:

- Name
- Course
- Year of study

2. Background

- You said you are studying [course name]; are you enjoying the course?
PROBE
- Why did you choose it?
- What do you like most about it?
- Is there anything you dislike about it?
- Why did you choose to study close to home?
- Are you happy with the decision to stay in the Sunderland area?

3. Involvement

- Thinking back to your first year, did you attend the Fresher's fair or any of the Fresher's events and activities?
- **IF YES** How did you find this/these? Did you meet people by attending? Do you still see those people?
- **IF NO** Why didn't you attend?
- Is there anything that would encourage you to attend?
Do you feel that you have missed out on anything by not attending?
- Have you joined any University of Sunderland clubs or societies?
- **IF YES** What clubs and societies have you joined? Are you enjoying them?
How often do you attend? Has this helped you to meet new people?
- **IF NO** Why haven't you joined any clubs or societies?
- Do you use the University of Sunderland Sports facilities such as the gym and classes etc?
- **IF YES** What facilities do you use? How often do you use them? Has this helped you to meet new people?
- **IF NO** Why don't you use the University sports facilities?
- Is there anything that would encourage you to join a club or society or to use sports facilities in the future?
- Do you wish that you had got involved in activities and events more in your first year? PROBE

4. Barriers

- What barriers or difficulties have you faced during your time studying at the University of Sunderland?
- **IF NOT COVERED ABOVE:** Have you found any of the following to be barriers or difficulties? If so, how?
 - Making friends
 - Money
 - University workload
 - Transportation

- Other external commitments
- Not living on campus
- For barriers/difficulties identified: How have you tried to overcome these?
PROBE.
- Is there anything that The University of Sunderland could do to help overcome these difficulties? PROBE

5. Belonging

- How important is it to you that you feel a 'sense of belonging' during your time as a student? PROBE
- Do you feel a sense of belonging to the Psychology/Childhood Studies/Tourism **programme**? WHY is this?
- Do you feel a sense of belonging to the **Faculty** of:
Applied Sciences (*Psychology*)
Education and Society and the Education Department (*Childhood Studies*)
Business and Law and the Business and Management Department (*Tourism*)
WHY is this?
- Do you feel a sense of belonging to the University of Sunderland as a whole?
WHY is this?
- What do you think would help you to feel an increased sense of belonging?
PROBE

6. Subject Activities

- Do you feel your course/programme of study allows you enough interaction with other students? WHY IS THIS?

Psychology: The Sandbox Studio and Problem based learning

The Sandbox Studio

- Do you use the Sandbox Studio? If NO Why not?
- What do think of it?
- How and when do you use it?
- What is the best thing about it?

- What could be improved?
- Has the Sandbox Studio helped you to interact more with other psychology students?
- IF YES - Are these students local or non-local students, or both?
- What impact has this had on students? Has it been a good thing?
Has it encouraged integration? PROBE

Problem Based Learning

- Do you enjoy problem based group learning activities?
- Is there anything you would change? (e.g. more often/less often)
- Have they helped you to get to know your fellow students?
- IF YES - Are these students local or non-local students, or both?
- What impact has this had on students? Has it been a good thing?
- Has it encouraged integration? PROBE

Tourism: Field trips

- Did you attend the field trip to London?
- What did you enjoy about it?
- What could be improved?
- Do you think the field trip is held at the right time of year?
- Did it help you to get to know your fellow students?
- IF YES - Are these students local or non-local students, or both?
- What impact has this had on student? Has it been a good thing?
- Has it encouraged integration? PROBE

Childhood studies: Class fundraising for charities

- Have you taken part in the class fundraising activities?
- What did you enjoy about it?
- What could be improved?
- Have they helped you to get to know your fellow students?
- IF YES - Are these students local or non-local students, or both?
- What impact has this had on student? Has it been a good thing?
- Has it encouraged integration? PROBE

Is there anything that would help you to interact more with other students on your course/programme of study?

7. Summary and Close

- What are your thoughts on the things we've discussed today? Was it interesting/useful?
- Is there anything you want to add or that you feel we haven't discussed today?

On behalf of The University of Sunderland many thanks for participating.

10.3 Appendix III: Tools for wider dissemination and use

10.3.1 Retaining students: what helps and what hinders? A workshop for Degree Programme Directors (Newcastle University)

This section gives notes for a workshop facilitator, including handouts for participants. PowerPoint slides for this session are provided as separate file

Section/time	Notes	Materials
Introduce workshop 5min	Brief introduction on slide Distribute action plan sheets: tell participants these sheets are part of the conclusion of the workshop, but if ideas occur during the workshop then note them down.	Reflection and action plan sheets
Introduce research project 3min	Brief introduction on slide	Full project report is available on HEA website
Outline findings 3min	The findings of the research project structure the rest of this workshop. The headings for the findings are: 1. Being prepared 2. Interact early + interact often = integration? 3. Integration: difference 4. Being part of a team or group 5. Integration: social and academic recursively intertwined	
1. Being prepared	1.1 See <i>Handout 1: 'Peter' case study</i> and facilitator's notes 1.2 At what point in time did Peter realise that the course he'd chosen 'wasn't quite for me'?	Case study: 'Peter'

10min	<p><u>'When I got there and I did a bit of the course I realised that it wasn't quite... I realised that it wasn't quite for me'.</u></p> <p>1.3-1.6 are suggested as discussion questions to link the 'Peter' case study with participants' own practice.</p>	
Optional short break		
2. Introductions 5min	<p>2.1 Tell (not ask!) the group to introduce themselves. <i>NOTE: this part of the workshop is intended to be experiential, to remind participants of the socially awkward experience of introducing oneself at the start of a course. It is essential that this instruction is given abruptly and at this stage, now the workshop has begun and participants have already worked together on a task. The facilitator should sit down after giving the instruction and evade any requests for clarification.</i></p> <p>2.2 After 5 minutes (or unbearably awkward silence, whichever comes first), regain your professional manner. Apologise for giving poor instructions, and give the second set of instructions. When the task is complete, ask the group if they have experienced more or less awkward introductory activities. Steer the conversation toward a consensus that, for new students, introductions need to be made <i>with reference to a clear structure</i>.</p> <p>2.3 Print and prepare <i>Handout 2: Introductions</i> in advance. Give an envelope to each table group and ask them to order the sequence of events.</p> <p>2.4 Discuss the DPD's possible intentions for this activity</p>	

10min 5-10min	2.5 Discuss students possible responses to this activity. Then click to show student quotes (from focus group discussions and interviews).	Printed slips of paper; envelopes.
3. Integration: difference 5-10min 10min 15-20min	<p>3.1 Listing sorts of difference: group brainstorm</p> <p>Invite groups to compare their lists with the list of 'social graces' and other suggested 'differences'. Encourage discussion of definitions for each 'difference'.</p> <p>3.2 Read the 'Engineering Women' case study. Discussion questions on PowerPoint slide.</p>	<p>Blank paper; pens</p> <p>Case study: 'Engineering Women'</p>
Suggested coffee break		
4. Being part of a team 5min 10min	<p>4.1 With your group, discuss a positive and a negative experience of working as part of a team.</p> <p>4.2 Discussion: what do you want your students to gain from working in a team</p> <p>a. in terms of subject knowledge? Examples: an understanding of the pros and cons of different approaches to an issue; clarification of issues.</p> <p>b. in terms of skills development? Examples: negotiation tactics; diplomacy skills; division of tasks and responsibilities.</p> <p>Take a large sheet of paper and fold it in half, making 2 columns.</p> <p>4.3 Use the left column to list aspects of teamworking you anticipate students might find challenging.</p> <p>Pass your sheet to the group on your right.</p>	

3x10min	<p>4.4 How can these challenges be overcome? Write in the right column.</p> <p>Pass your sheet to the group on your right.</p> <p>4.5 Discuss whether the two lists match: are these appropriate ways to overcome these challenges?</p>	Large (A3 or larger) paper; pens
<p>5. Integration: social and academic</p> <p>10min</p>	<p>Overarching findings about <i>learning stuff</i> (the academic aspects of the student experience) and <i>meeting people</i> (the social aspects of the student experience).</p> <p>Presentation; invite discussion as appropriate.</p>	
<p>Conclusions: revisiting the research findings</p> <p>15min</p>	<p>Reminder of key findings as summary of the workshop.</p> <p>Return to action plan sheets distributed in the introduction to the workshop. Ask table groups to decide whether to complete these individually or through discussion.</p>	Reflection and action plan sheets (distributed during Introduction)

Workshop handouts

1. Being prepared case study: 'Peter'

'Peter' transferred courses at the mid-point of Semester 1. This was his account of how he arrived in an 'unprepared' state:

"Yeah, basically, I didn't really know much about it and also I felt like, basically like I didn't...the reason I moved was because I didn't know much about it but I can't say for sure that there isn't enough information about the course out there...I feel that the reason that I jumped into something that I didn't know so much about and maybe shouldn't have ...like I came through clearing ...and there was a bit of a panic at the time and I was a bit worried about whether I was going to get into university or not...like I wanted to make sure that I could get into a course and also I didn't really know what I wanted to do so I wasn't really, so I didn't really have a course in mind that I wanted to do so I just sort of went through things that sounded interesting and obviously at the time, at the clearing time it was a bit of a panic so...and it sounded interesting and I didn't do as much research as I should have done and when I found out I had got on the course I was happy, and I thought ok brilliant and then when I got there and I did a bit of the course I realised that it wasn't quite...I realised that it wasn't quite for me but luckily I was also doing some different modules and I realised that I enjoyed that a lot more..."

Facilitator's notes

This copy of the 'Peter' case study is highlighted showing some words and phrases 'Peter' used that acknowledge he was unprepared, and identify what he felt he did wrong (1.1).

"Yeah, basically, I didn't really know much about it and also I felt like, basically like I didn't...the reason I moved was because I didn't know much about it but I can't say for sure that there isn't enough information about the course out there...I feel that the reason that I jumped into something that I didn't know so much about and maybe shouldn't have ...like I came through clearing ...and there was a bit of a panic at the time and I was a bit worried about whether I was going to get into university or not...like I wanted to make sure that I could get into a course and also I didn't really know what I wanted to do so I wasn't really, so I didn't really have a course in mind that I wanted to do so I just sort of went through things that sounded interesting and obviously at the time, at the clearing time it was a bit of a panic so...and it sounded interesting and I didn't do as much research as I should have done and when I found out I had got on the course I was happy, and I thought ok brilliant and then when I got there and I did a bit of the course I realised that it wasn't quite...I realised that it wasn't quite for me but luckily I was also doing some different modules and I realised that I enjoyed that a lot more..."

2. The T-shirt activity

Facilitator's preparation: *print these six statements and cut them into six strips of paper, with one statement on each slip. Shuffle the slips and put them into an envelope.*

Task: *Give each table group an envelope. Ask them to order the sequence of events.*

In the School of Chemical Engineering and Advanced Materials at Newcastle University the usual staff-student introductions party was changed to accommodate a larger intake of students.

Students and staff were given a white T-shirt and marker pens and asked to draw representations of their likes and interests.

They were then given a set of clear instructions about finding others with similar representations to form a team.

The Degree Programme Director led the session. They stressed that each team must have a mix of genders and ethnicities.

The DPD actively intervened and encouraged students to move away from their accustomed comfort zones.

Teams formed in this way subsequently worked on a project together throughout Semester 1.

3. Integration: difference

3.2 Case study: 'Engineering Women'

As part of the evaluation of the introduction of Engineering Teams into the School of Mechanical and Systems Engineering (M&SE) at Newcastle University, ten women were interviewed as a focus group about their experience of working as part of a team.

They gave their permission for the interview to be recorded and for extracts from the transcribed text to be used in reports as part of the *What Works? Student retention and success* project.

Why Mechanical Engineering?

These women engineers had chosen their course of study very carefully. As one of them put it "women just don't casually go into Mechanical Engineering". They had a strong desire to 'make things' and they were aware that completion of the course would ensure that they had an entry into a much desired career. Many of them talked about their very strong wish to succeed in completing the course. As this participant put it:

"...I think if you don't know what you want to do and you want to do something big you can do anything and this is a good starting point."

Being part of a team

This group of ten women represented the majority of the female students in their year and 12% of the entire first year student cohort. Each Engineering Team is composed of either five or six students and the School is vigilant in ensuring that women always have another female team-mate. On reflection, although the majority of the women found having a female companion helpful initially in providing "camaraderie" and "back up", over time they came to view it as having less importance. As a woman interviewed as part of a different focus group commented, "I think if you are intimidated by guys you have chosen the wrong course!" Within the group a consensus emerged that, generally, as one student put it "I don't mind working with the lads".

The group's responses to questions aimed to elicit their account of the positive and the less positive aspects of their experience of teamworking revealed Engineering women's use of a complex set of strategies as a means of securely locating themselves within their teams of mainly male fellow students. Ensuring this position

is, it is assumed, a means to ensure their safe completion of the course and the achievement of their career goals.

“Working with the lads”

All of the women who participated in the group talked appreciatively of their relationships with male team colleagues although descriptions of how they ‘managed’ these interactions were wryly humorous and occasionally rueful. They felt that they had arrived to start the course with clear aims, a strong sense of motivation and a strong wish to do well which it was acknowledged might be at variance with that of their male colleagues:

“I think that us girls we have got a bit more of an aim...if I wasn’t going to try to do well I wouldn’t be here...whereas I think some of the boys take a little bit longer to realise that a bit of hard work is a good thing and some of them still maybe need to learn that...a little bit. I don’t know but maybe...a little less mature or something...a little less focused...some of the girls can just get on with it”.

Proving ourselves

The women in the group talked about the process of gaining team acceptance through the adoption of what appeared to be an additional set of ‘tasks’. They had to ‘prove’ that they possessed a range of skills, that they could exhibit the strength of character to accept teasing without demur and, in some cases, that they were prepared to adopt a role of supporting the team and compensating for the interests and preferences of their male colleagues. This is described in this participant’s comments:

“Sometimes when we are doing projects the boys want to do all the exciting stuff and there are lots of long, boring things to do and they don’t want to do it...and you know that you are just going to end up doing it on your own but with another girl who sees the necessity to do this thing and to just let them continue playing with their little groove or whatever....we will write up the report, don’t worry! **[laughing]**”

On occasions women had to be assertive in gaining inclusion within the team. One overseas female student commented that “...the guys go ahead and do it on their own...then we have got nothing to do, so I had to tell them “we are in a team, so can we work together?”

Being able to 'take it'

This group of women engineers said that they felt they should 'take' teasing or mild sexist banter which they saw as something that would be with them for the rest of their career. This woman expresses a generally accepted sentiment:

"At the end of the day you will probably be a couple of girls with all these men anyway so you have got to be able to take it".

Coping with gendered approaches to work:

There was a general agreement among the group that male group team members displayed a partiality for some aspects of teamwork in preference to others and that they may have a tendency to "focus on the more interesting aspects".:

This difference was thought of by participants as having emanating from gendered differences in approaches to project work organisation. Some participants said that they would plan ahead and at times would take on the responsibility for organising the work of the team, sometimes officially as team leader and sometimes subtly and unofficially. It was felt that male team members would "do it in the end but just not that well".

"...in our group I am the organiser who sets tasks each week and I think around the table [referring to participants in the group] actually there are quite a few people who have been nominated as the leader of the group or who have become like the organiser."

Other people's assumptions about women engineers

Group participants felt that older members of staff, in particular the workshop supervisors tended to assume that as women they might not possess the practical skills necessary and there were rueful reports of what they felt were patronising comments. Two students said that they had both been told that planing was "just like filing your nails" and another that a workshop assistant had been patronisingly over-enthusiastic about the work she had completed:

"Yes it is the older blokes definitely...are kind of a bit surprised...because I have actually done a lot of workshop stuff and at the end of the week when we had produced the project I had one of these blokes come up to me and he was 'did you do this all yourself...did you do this all yourself?' [**mimicking an excited tone**] and I said yes 'Oh I am not joking this is really good!' and he got all excited because it was pretty good work. But it was just...I don't know if he would have got as excited if it was a boy, let's put it that way."

But occasionally male team colleagues could also be patronising and try to adopt a dominant position in relation to their female colleagues in the workshop context:

“I don’t know if it is just that guys love it but guys like to build ...’look what I can do’ and so if you are saying ‘I will screw this bit together’ it’s like ‘no, no, I’ll do it’ ‘ok’... and then you are left with nothing and then you end up leading the group... they get a bit controlling about it. Or you will be doing something and they will come and say ‘that is not right, let me do it, and take it off you’.”

However this potential sense of male dominance could also emerge as male over-protectiveness as described in this incident when a female student, who had already identified herself as having very strong bonds with her male team mates, suffered a minor injury:

“We are finishing off the wind turbines and at the very, very last moment I was working with pliers when I accidentally got a small injury – just like one drop of blood...and two guys were just flapping in panic around me **[group laughter]**..’you need a plaster, you need a plaster, do something, do something!’ I was... ‘wait a second I need to finish that’. They were ‘no, no, you need help! You need help!’ That was really amazing. I was just smiling at their reaction”.

Conclusions

Some of the women taking part in the focus group said that being allocated into a team had helped in the development of strong bonds and friendships:

“I don’t know if we were really lucky with our teams but we are like best friends with the boys in our group and we are so happy that we got put together.”

And another woman’s comment:

“It really helped us because we might not initially have made friends with them ourselves if we hadn’t been put with them.”

In the group’s experience, the main source of overt sexism was from older people, workshop supervisors earning a special mention for having been unthinkingly patronising in their interactions with women students on occasion. The casual sexism of an invited external speaker they found to be annoying but attributed it to the speaker’s age. He seems to have been out of step in simply ignoring their existence and his potential to cause offence through showing some slides containing sexist jokes and, as described here, sexist images:

“Yes, that was one of the [external] lecturers who made me a bit cross...I just

thought... 'you know what, he could have taken those slides out'...there was a yacht, beautiful carbon fibre...do we need the bird in the bikini? Not really!"

However, here too participants gave the impression that they felt this was something which they had to be strong enough to ignore. As one participant commented, "if you were the sort of person who was going to be really insulted by that you wouldn't be bothered coming here". It seems that women in this focus group saw themselves as largely strong and resilient, able to 'prove themselves' and 'cope with' what might be perceived as casual sexist behaviour towards them. The ability of some women to manage team relationships was stressed although it was also acknowledged that some women might not have the kind of personality which assisted them in doing so:

"...Other kinds of people really struggle to be around boys all day because they are quite different to hang around with than a big bunch of girls when you are at home...but as long as you can handle being in two different kinds of environment then they don't have a problem at all with it."

Those women who had found it relatively easy to become integrated into this programme appear to have challenged themselves with a set of additional tasks to those faced by their male colleagues. They consciously acted in a way which 'proved' that they were skilled, that they had the strength of character to accept possibly ribald teasing without demur and in some cases that they were prepared to adopt a role of supporting the team and compensating for the interests and preferences of their male colleagues. Being able to do these things seemed to represent a badge of honour and, in their view, a preparation for the world of employment. What is not clear however is how women who choose not to accept these roles or do not have the inner resources to actively foster relationships with those around them, in particular their male colleagues, fare in a competitive team environment.

Reflection and Action Plan

1. Being prepared				
What pre-arrival information is provided to students on your programme? List:	Is this information fit for purpose? Tick:			What needs to be done?
	Yes	Partially	No	
Notes and questions:				
2. Introductions				
What welcome week activities are offered to students on your programme to help them meet other students, and to meet staff? List:	Is this activity fit for purpose? Tick:			What needs to be done?
	Yes	Partially	No	
Notes and questions:				

3. Integration: difference

What are the minority and majority groups in your subject area and at your University?

What does your programme do to acknowledge these differences and work towards integrating all subgroups of students?

For example: participation in institutional or national initiatives; targeted activities to boost the involvement of minority groups.

List activities and initiatives:	Is this activity fit for purpose?			What needs to be done?
	Yes	Partially	No	

Notes and questions:

4. Being part of a team

Which modules, stages, or phases of your programme include opportunities for students to work in teams?

List existing opportunities:	Stage(s) and/or semester(s) that this opportunity takes place

List potential opportunities:	Stage(s) and/or semester(s) that this opportunity could take place
Notes and questions:	
5. Integration: social and academic	
<p>Look at the activities you listed in section 2: Introductions. Is the focus of these activities on <i>learning stuff</i> or on <i>meeting people</i>? Mark an 'x' on the line below to show where your welcome week activities sit on this continuum.</p> <p><i>learning stuff</i>-----<i>meeting people</i></p> <p>Do you think this balance needs to be altered?</p>	
Notes and questions:	

10.3.2 Stepped recommendations as checklists for practice

Recommendation 1: Encourage early interaction between students within an activity-based, structured academic environment

We recommend that every degree programme should engage all students in an activity-based social event at the earliest point possible. This event should go beyond a ‘meet and greet’ social gathering in that it is predominantly *interactive* and *highly structured* by staff.

Checklist of recommendations

In support of this recommendation we offer these stepped recommendations to stimulate reflection and discussion, and not as a prescribed list.

Checklist item	Notes on action taken/to be taken
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How will the importance of attending the event be communicated to students? Is it possible to include it as a mandatory requirement of the course? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students who view themselves as ‘shy’ may be reticent about attending because of social anxiety and may need to be reassured that although they will be asked to interact with others, they will be supported in doing so. <p>(1) What is the best method of communicating this message to students in your subject area at the point where you have not had the opportunity of establishing who will experience a social event as challenging?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some student groups, particularly mature or local students, appear to be more likely to adopt a purely functional approach to their degree programme and view it as an opportunity for knowledge acquisition only. 	

<p>(1) How far has it been possible to include a clear academic focus within the activity-based social event which will give those students most likely to adopt this approach a clear rationale for attending and participating?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In considering the size of room/space (if appropriate) which you will need for the event/activity, have you considered the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Number of students and staff? (2) Does the space allow those present to circulate free? (3) Whether the amount of space needed for the event/activity planned must also accommodate equipment or display materials which are to be used? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The choice of event/activity should be specifically chosen for its applicability to course content and student group. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Has careful consideration at programme level been given to the choice of an activity appropriate to both course content and student group(s)? (2) How will the chosen activity facilitate interaction between students and between students and staff? (3) Is there an agreement about the circumstances in which staff will intervene to encourage students to move from within their accustomed social comfort zone and how this will be done? 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We would recommend that staff involved in a Programme should discuss and plan strategies for the inclusion of potentially marginalised groups into the activity/event. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Within the context of the specific Programme, is it possible to identify student groups who represent 'minorities' or who have the potential to become 	

<p>marginalised?</p> <p>(2) What strategies currently exist within the programme for the inclusion of these students and which new strategies might it be appropriate to adopt?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a clear understanding amongst Programme staff about how the activity/event fits with the rest of the degree programme? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) If the activity has been to form teams or groups of any kind, how will these be used? (2) If the activity has involved production of an object/objects, how will these be used within the programme? 	

Recommendation 2 – Engage students in collaborative learning as part of teams or groups or using specific approaches such as Problem Based Learning.

Checklist of recommendations:

We recommend that consideration is given to the amenability of the module and programme content to a collaborative learning approach and that, where possible, this is adopted. Preparation of students to take part in collaborative learning is essential to its success.

In support of this recommendation we offer these stepped recommendations to stimulate reflection and discussion, and not as a prescribed list.

Checklist item	Notes on action taken/to be taken
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff at programme level should have a clear understanding about whether students are being asked to work as part of teams⁴ or groups⁴. We suggest that this choice will be informed by both the tasks students are asked to do, and by the culture and structures of the subject area. Further areas for consideration include the number of contact hours, and assignment structures. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Will the team/group be short term (for example throughout one module) or longer term (throughout an academic year)? 2. What will be the focus of the group/team? Will it complete a project or other assessed work? Is the purpose specific to your subject/discipline? 	

⁴ **A team** is here defined and understood as a number of people working interdependently towards a common goal. Team members may be selected for the complementarity of their skills.

A group is here defined as a number of people working together but often independently towards a common purpose

<p>3. If there are minority groupings within the student cohort, how will their specific social and/or academic needs be accommodated in the process of allocation to teams?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The allocation of students to groups/teams will depend upon the subject area and also the type of work or project which they are to undertake. <p>(1) Are students made aware prior to entry to their degree programme that they will be expected to work collaboratively with their peers? How is this information communicated to them?</p> <p>(2) What form of team/group allocation will provide a 'best fit' for the subject area or project? (options include student self selection; structured allocation to ensure distribution of skills and characteristics; random allocation by staff)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to pay attention to the formation of teams/groups and their understanding of responsibilities within the team/group. <p>1. How will the process of team building be facilitated within the induction process?</p> <p>2. What method will be used to ensure that all team/group members understand their responsibilities towards the team/group, how to manage tasks, and how feedback on the team's/group's progress will be communicated within the group/team?</p> <p>3. What arrangements will be made to provide support to teams and groups and how will these arrangements be communicated to team members?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The knowledge that staff support is available if required is essential to the healthy functioning of teams. 	

<p>(1) Will it be better to utilise an existing system of student support or to organise a new system?</p> <p>(2) To what degree will students be expected to deal with problematic team/group dynamics independently before accessing staff support?</p> <p>(3) How are students expected to notify staff of their need for support?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team and group projects/assessed work should be specifically formulated to accommodate a team/group working approach. <p>(1) Will it be possible to modify an existing project/assignment or will it be necessary to design one which is team/group specific?</p> <p>(2) What factors, specific to the degree programme, will it be necessary to consider in the design of the assessed work?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most frequent student complaint about team or group work is when team members' contributions are perceived to be unequal. <p>(1) What system will the programme use to ensure that team members' efforts are reflected in the mark awarded?</p> <p>(2) Is a system of team process reports appropriate within your subject area or are you aware of any other systems to help ensure fairness in mark distribution?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Team and group working approaches should be constantly evaluated in response to student and staff feedback and in the context of course and curriculum changes. 	

Slides to accompany Appendix III

STUDENT INTEGRATION:
WHAT HELPS AND WHAT
HINDERS?.....RETAINING
STUDENTS

Workshop for Degree Programme Directors

Introduction to the workshop

Introduction to the workshop

- What works? Practical focus based on the findings of a collaborative research project
- Aims:
 - ▣ *understand and discuss* key messages of a piece of collaborative research into student retention
 - ▣ *consider* how these key messages can apply to the context of your degree programme(s)
 - ▣ *identify* ways of adapting and applying these key messages to your degree programme(s)

Introduction to the research

Introduction to the research

- National project, 2008-2011
- Funded by HEFCE and Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- Partnership between the University of Hull, Newcastle University, and the University of Sunderland
- Focus on 'how does student integration affect retention' for mature and part-time students, local students, and Engineering students
 - similar findings for all groups across all institutions

Key findings of this research

Key findings

- 1. Interact early + interact often = integration?
- 2. Staff facilitation of the initial process
- 3. Integration: being 'different'
- 4. Being part of a team or group
- 5. Integration: social and academic recursively intertwined.

1. Being prepared

Knowing what to expect: arrival and pre-arrival

1. Being prepared

□ Read the 'Peter' case study

- 1.1 Underline words and phrases where Peter acknowledges that he was unprepared, and identifies what he felt he did wrong.
- 1.2 At what point did Peter realise that the course he'd chosen 'wasn't quite for me'?
- 1.3 Have you encountered students like Peter? Have you encountered other signs indicating that students are not prepared for university study, or that they've chosen a course that 'wasn't quite for me'?

1. Being prepared

□ With 'Peter' (and other unprepared students) in mind...

- 1.4 How would you have ensured Peter was prepared for your course?
- 1.5 How does your programme tell prospective and pre-arrival students what to expect? This might include online, paper-based, and face-to-face methods of communication.
- 1.6 Compare your answers to Q5 with Q6. Are there gaps to address? What enhancements could be made to the quality, quantity, and delivery of information?

1. Being prepared

□ Research findings:

- approximately **one third** of students involved in the research across the three universities said they were "fully prepared" for university
- **two thirds** said they were "partially prepared"
- Almost **two thirds** of students involved in the research said they had thought about withdrawing from their programme during first year. It is not possible to establish a direct correlation; nevertheless, this offers food for thought.

2. Introductions

2. Introductions

- 2.1 Introduce yourself
- 2.2 You will be asked to introduce yourself to two people in the room. Choose people not in your table group. Your introduction should include:
 - ▣ the name you want people to call you
 - ▣ your subject area or School
 - ▣ what you ate for breakfast.
 The facilitator will tell you when to begin.

2. Introductions

- 2.3 The t-shirt exercise: order the sequence of events.
- 2.4 What do you think the DPD was trying to achieve through this activity?
- 2.5 How do you think the students reacted to this activity?

2. Introductions

- Student quotes:

"Yeah, I think I am quite shy, so I think actually it is quite a good thing to pressure you to mix with people rather than just hanging back and not doing things"

3. Integration: difference

The challenges of being 'different'

3. Integration: difference

- 3.1 In groups, how many ways can you list that mark students out as 'different', either in their own eyes or in the eyes of other students (and staff)?

5 minutes



3. Integration: difference

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- Gender
- Race
- Religion
- Age
- Ability/Disability
- Class
- Culture
- Education
- Ethnicity
- Sexuality
- Spirituality
- And...
 - full-time or part-time?
 - living in University halls or living independently?
 - family history of Higher Education?
 - ...?

3. Integration: difference

- Read the 'Engineering Women' case study.
 - 3.2 Which strategies did these students adopt?
 - 3.3 What are the advantages and disadvantages of the strategies they adopted?
- 3.4 Is there a gender divide in your subject area? Which groups of students perceive themselves as 'different' in your subject area:
 - at a national level?
 - globally?
 - in your University?

3. Integration: difference

- 3.5 What strategies have you seen 'different' and 'majority' group students in your subject area adopting?
- 3.6 How do staff currently support these 'different' students?
- 3.7 How can you support 'different' students to adopt positive strategies?

4. Being part of a team

'There is power in a union'
- Billy Bragg

'Hell is other people'
- Jean-Paul Sartre

4. Being part of a team

- 4.1 With your group, discuss a positive and a negative experience of working as part of a team. Did these experiences lead to deep friendships? Or were they functional relationships, enough to complete the task?
- 4.2 What do you want your students to gain from working in a team:
 - in terms of subject knowledge?
 - in terms of skills development?

4. Being part of a team

□ Student quote:

"you don't just feel like one individual person on a course, it is kind of like you are in a conglomerate of people kind of thing...I think it does definitely make you feel part of the group or part of something within the year group rather than just one lone person"

4. Being part of a team

- Take a large sheet of paper and fold it in half, making 2 columns.
 - 4.3 Use the left column to list aspects of team working you anticipate students might find challenging.
- Pass your sheet to the group on your right.
 - 4.4 How can these challenges be overcome? Write in the right column.
- Pass this sheet to the group on your right.
 - 4.5 Discuss whether the two lists match: are these appropriate ways to overcome these challenges?

5. Integration: social and academic

Meeting people and learning stuff

5. Integration: social and academic

□ Key messages:

- both *academic* and *social* integration are important to the student experience.

Translation: for students, going to University is about learning stuff and meeting people.

- *academic integration* is a precursor to *social integration*.

Translation: meeting people is better when you're also learning stuff.

5. Integration: social and academic

□ Student quote:

"In the first hour....you were sat in the introductory lecture thinking 'I don't know anyone', 'how am I going to make friends?' and they said 'we are going to put you in these teams' and instantly there was....straight away there was like 10 or 11 other people you knew straight away"

Conclusions

Conclusions

- Review of key findings:
- 1. Interact early + interact often = integration?
- 2. Staff facilitation of the initial process
- 3. Integration: being 'different'
- 4. Being part of a team
- 5. Integration: social and academic recursively intertwined.
- Return to Reflection and Action Plan sheet, as an individual or as a group
- Questions and comments?

Links

Information and resources from the 'What Works' Student Retention and Success Project are available on the Higher Education Academy's website:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/retention-and-success>