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Improving tertiary student outcomes in their first year of study

This project identifies practical strategies for use by tertiary education institutions (TEIs) in New Zealand to improve student retention, persistence, and completion. It was designed to explore the experiences of students, teachers, and administrators in seven tertiary institutions.

The cost of non-completion is very high, and rising. Wider access to tertiary study has meant an increasingly diverse student population. The government is taking great interest in how well institutions retain learners, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds. We wanted to offer institutions guidelines for practice that would help clarify the retention puzzle and enhance learning.

Aims of the project

We asked: "What can New Zealand TEIs and their teachers do to adapt their current processes and practices to improve retention, persistence, and completion of diverse students in their first year?"
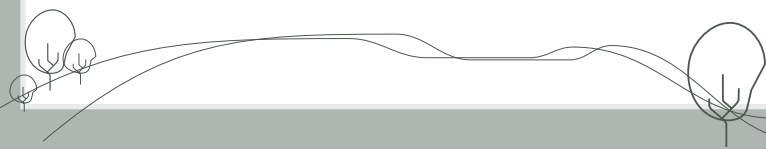
Our project aimed to:

- identify policies, processes, and teaching/learning approaches used by TEIs to improve the outcomes of diverse first-year students;

- ask second-time students whether they had ever considered withdrawing from study and, if they had, what enabled them to stay;

- find out what teachers and administrators of first-time students thought caused early student departure and what could be done about it;

- synthesise the data to develop ideas for improving tertiary student outcomes;

- develop a partnership with TEI practitioners to validate the synthesis as suitable for practice; and

- in partnership with practitioners, develop and disseminate guidelines for future practice.

Research design

Two distinct approaches have been identified to improving student outcomes—tertiary institutions use policies and practices to integrate students socially and academically into their particular culture, or adapt their administrative and academic cultures to meet the diverse interests of their students. We aimed to produce research-based guidelines for using the adaptation approach to improve student outcomes, while not neglecting data informing the integration approach.

As it was impractical to research both approaches using a single data-gathering tool, we used a design that included a survey of 681 students enrolled for the first time in 2003,

interviews with 51 of these students, and discussions with another 70 in 12 focus groups. We also conducted an open-ended survey of 137 teachers of first-time students and interviewed 30 administrators with special responsibility for first-time students. The guidelines produced by synthesising the data were validated by 64 teachers and administrators.

The seven TEIs in our project—two universities, four polytechnics, and one college of education—varied in size, mission, characteristics, and geographical location. Two offered programmes at a distance and two others had a significant Māori and/or Pasifika presence. Rather than use a national representative sample, we chose to use seven institutional studies.

Summary of findings

The key findings of this study were:

- *Findings mirrored overseas studies.* The proportion of students considering withdrawing early, or actually doing so, and their reasons for this, were remarkably consistent with international findings.

- *Some retention challenges were shared.* Institutions could improve retention by giving students sound academic advice on entry and welcome them with effective orientation. Most importantly, perhaps, institutions need to ensure that students have a manageable workload.

- *Institutions also face unique retention challenges.* Results differed between institutions. Some showed weaknesses in their support structures; some used teaching methods that did not suit learners; others lacked flexibility in dealing with diversity.

- *There is some support for adaptation.* Around one-fifth of students considering withdrawal gave as major reasons an institutional culture that did not recognise their diversity, and feelings of alienation.

- *Learner-centred institutional cultures achieve better retention.* To serve learning, both teaching and student support should meet the needs of diverse students. This requires flexibility in teaching, assessment, and administrative systems, and manageable workloads for students.

- *Positive relationships between students and significant people in the institution are important.* Relationships are key factors in determining retention or early withdrawal. Positive relationships between students and their peers, institutional support staff, and teachers have major effects.

- *Institutions should provide suitable support structures and services.* For students at risk of leaving early, support services can be vital. All staff need to understand the functions of the various support services and refer students to them when appropriate.

- *The factors responsible for early departure are often outside the institution's control, but can be mitigated.* Early warning processes (such as systematic reporting of absences, missed assignments, and sudden deterioration of grades) can minimise withdrawal even when its causes are non-institutional.

- *Teachers do influence retention.* Students recognise and value supportive teachers. Teachers recognise that teaching is more than the transmission of content. Many go out of their way to develop learner-centred teaching approaches.

- *Many teachers recognise the diverse nature and needs of their students.* They welcome and establish rapport; help students establish social and academic networks within the class and institution; and provide pastoral care for each student.

- *To work effectively with students from diverse backgrounds, teachers need professional development and manageable workloads.* Both students and teachers recognised the importance of a manageable workload in effective teaching. Many teachers felt they needed professional development to deal effectively with diversity.

- *Administrators play an important role in retaining students.* Many show a strong client service orientation, wanting effective student support services, pastoral care, and adequate resources and facilities. A number wanted proactive monitoring and follow-up of individual student needs.

- *Catering for the needs of students from diverse backgrounds is uneven.* Many teachers and administrators were willing to adapt their ways of working to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Others thought fairness required everyone to be treated in the same way.

Limitations of the project

Using case studies rather than a representative national sample means we cannot generalise results in a statistically meaningful way. Even within the case studies the Māori, Pasifika, and international voices were too few to analyse separately. Further research is needed into what enables students from diverse backgrounds to stay and achieve.

Guidelines for practice

The findings were synthesised into nine guidelines for practice, which were submitted to teachers and administrators for comment and subsequently modified.

1. Foster an institutional culture where good teaching is valued.

   Institutions that value good teaching ensure manageable workloads for teachers and provide professional development on working effectively with diversity

(teacher survey; student survey; interviews; focus groups).

2. Cultivate good teaching.

   Good teaching is a key factor in retaining students. It includes developing good relationships with students, providing pastoral care, using a variety of appropriate teaching methods, making content relevant, relating it to "real life", setting a manageable workload, using a variety of assessment methods, giving prompt and full feedback, and being available inside and outside class (teacher survey; student survey; interviews; focus groups).

3. Create an institutional culture that is learner-centred.

   A learner-centred culture welcomes students, and respects and adapts to their diverse values, attributes, and knowledge. It has flexible administrative systems, teaching, and assessment, and helps students establish social and academic networks in their class and the institution (administrator interviews; teacher survey; student survey; interviews; focus groups).

4. Foster positive relationships between students and staff.

   Relationships between students and their peers, support staff, and teachers are a key factor in determining retention or early withdrawal. When relationships are strong, students will discuss issues, which helps prevent early withdrawal. Positive relationships also support academic and social integration (teacher survey; student interviews; focus groups).

5. Ensure sound academic advice is available.

   Our student survey revealed that about one-third enrol in the wrong course. Prospective students want to understand the nature of courses, the workload involved, and teaching methods used before they enrol. Students may need to be counselled out of taking a particular course. The drive for numbers does not lead to good retention (student survey; interviews; focus groups; administrator interviews).

6. Provide and maintain facilities, resources, and services that support good learning and teaching.

   Appropriate facilities, resources, and services are often vital. All staff must understand the support services and act as a reference point to them. Activities that help students create social networks are important (administrator interviews; teacher survey; student survey; interviews; focus groups).

7. Restrict class/tutorial group sizes so teachers/tutors can establish rapport with each student.

   Class size strongly influences the ability to establish an academic relationship. It also affects students' willingness to participate and ask questions. Every student should have the opportunity to establish good rapport with at least one teacher/tutor (teacher survey; student interviews; focus groups).

8. Monitor student performance as an early warning system.

   The factors that cause students to leave early are frequently outside the institution's control. Early warning—systematic reporting of absences, missed assignments, and sudden deterioration of grades to designated people within the institution—minimises actual departure and is integral to good pastoral care (administrator interviews; teacher survey; student survey).

9. Avoid generalised guidelines; research your own institution.

   While general guidelines can be helpful, institutions also have individual retention issues they must identify and address (student survey; teacher survey; administrator interviews).

Dissemination of findings

The project has already generated conference papers, articles in refereed journals, and case studies reported to individual institutions. This list is expected to grow during 2006.

Publications generated

Campbell, A. (2005, April). *Teaching and learning plan for School of Science and Engineering*. Discussion paper prepared for the School of Science and Engineering, University of Waikato.

Campbell, A. (2005, November). *Rationale for developing a system of pastoral care for first-year students*. Discussion paper presented to Dean's Advisory Group, School of Science and Engineering, University of Waikato.

Coltman, D. (2005, July). *New Zealand education system: A comparative analysis of practices and strategies for traditionally under-represented students*. Paper presented to the delegates to The Kellogg Institute, National Center of Developmental Education, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC, USA.

Dewart, B., & Rowan, L. (2005, October). *Improving tertiary student outcomes in the first year of study: What your students may not tell you*. Paper presented at the 5th annual New Zealand Bridging Educators conference, Manukau Institute of Technology.

Henderson, J. (2005, November). *Let's encourage them to stay!* Paper presented at the Christchurch College of Education research fair.

Leach, L., Zepke, N., & Prebble, T. (2005, August). *Now you have got them, how do you keep them? Students' views of why they stay*. Paper presented at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia research colloquium, Wellington.

Leadbeater, J. (2005, April). *Promoting effective teaching.* Paper presented at the Northland Polytechnic management retreat.

Prebble, T., Hargreaves, H., Leach, L., Naidoo, K., Suddaby, G., & Zepke, N. (2004). *Impact of student support services and academic development programmes on student outcomes in undergraduate tertiary study: A synthesis of the research.* Wellington: Ministry of Education. Retrieved from: http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=document&documentid=10247&data=l

Prebble, T., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2004, November). *It's not just what happens inside the classroom: Managers' views on student retention.* Paper presented at the NZARE conference, Wellington.

Rowan, L., & Dewart, B. (2005, July). *Things your students won't tell you.* Paper presented at Universal College of Learning staff development conference.

Wilson, S. (2005, August). *Why students succeed: WelTec students' views.* Paper presented at WelTec research seminar.

Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2005). Integration and adaptation: Approaches to the student retention and achievement puzzle. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 6*(1), 46–59.

Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Prebble, T. (2005). Now you have got them, how do you keep them? Factors that influence student departure and persistence. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies, 40*(1), 181–199.

Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Prebble, T. (2005, December). *Improving tertiary student outcomes: Teachers' views on teaching diverse students*. Paper presented at the NZARE conference, Dunedin.

Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Prebble, T. (in press). Being learner-centred: One way to improve student outcomes? *Studies in Higher Education.*

Zepke, N., Leach, L., Prebble, T., Henderson, J., Leadbeater, J., Solomon, N., & Wilson, S. (2005, December). *Improving tertiary student outcomes in their first year of study.* Paper presented at TLRI symposium, NZARE conference, Dunedin.

Both this summary and the full text of the report are available on the TLRI website: www.tlri.org.nz

Lead authors and researchers

Nick Zepke is an Associate Professor in the College of Education, Massey University. He researches and teaches in lifelong education, with particular interests in learning and teaching of adults (including assessment of their learning, aspects of the sociology of knowledge and policy, and futures studies relating to lifelong education).

Linda Leach has worked in adult and tertiary education for more than 20 years. She has been involved with community adult literacy provision and academic development in polytechnics as well as teaching undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in adult education. She currently works at Massey University where her research interests have included lifelong learning, student retention, and assessment.

Tom Prebble has spent most of his career at Massey University, teaching and publishing extensively in educational administration and leadership, managing Massey's large extramural programme, and leading its international activities. Recently he has re-engaged with research and teaching as Professor of Higher Education. He is currently doing consulting work in international education and programme evaluation.

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