Transition management case study: creating a transition tool box
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ABSTRACT: With an ever changing student population, internationalisation and strong strategic emphasis on retention, there is a critical need to provide pastoral and academic support to students at key transition points in their degree schemes. However, with increasing diversification in the student body and the problems faced, support must be offered proactively and in a manner which meets diverse student preferences and needs.

Following identification of student difficulties with the transition into UG level 3 within the School of Medical Sciences at the University of Aberdeen, a variety of strategies have been devised, developed and implemented, which has improved this key transition and stemmed the loss of students at this stage progressively in the last 4 years.

This paper will describe and explore this as a case study in designing tailored transition management approaches, and is applicable across all disciplines.

A focus on retention

A focal point of many university strategic plans is improvement of student retention. This increasingly used metric is viewed as an indication of the quality of student experience, the student centricity of institutions and the commitment to supporting students. As a parameter in many comparative league tables this is deemed as a priority action area is a key financial commitment consideration by students, institutions and funding councils. Retaining students is also a complex multi-dimensional process with academic and pastoral aspects combining to create a conundrum for which there is no easy fix (Thomas, 2002). Indeed, progress and improvement in reducing student attrition is more likely to be a sum of marginal gains rather than a magic bullet. While some student losses are unavoidable e.g. health issues, financial barriers, some are wholly avoidable provided there is adequate support and opportunity for intervention prior to the student departing. Offering support early and openly is critical in successful intervention and strategies designed with this principle in mind are most likely to yield positive outcomes (Crosling et al, 2009). Ideally, this helps address issues at a time when they are surmountable and can allow student reengagement at the earliest opportunity. However, this is highly complex in terms of cohort composition, discipline pressures, programme stage and many other variables. Initial ground work is therefore crucial in identifying the challenges facing the cohort and creating a profile for which strategies can be designed. This paper describes the development of a variety of retention strategies designed with the above principles in mind, and this has its roots in early identification of the challenges faced by specific student cohorts.

Intervention identification
The variable nature of the academic landscape and an increasingly diverse student body means that a single retention strategy or approach is unlikely to succeed and a critical step in the design of retention support mechanisms is identifying those most at risk within individual cohorts. These can be classically defined as mature students, low tariff students, students articulating from further education (FE) or home students. However, there are also specific times associated with progress through university where there is an enhanced vulnerability across the entire cohort that can impact and lessen retained numbers of student markedly. The precise timing of these crisis windows is dictated by a host of factors at institutional, school and discipline level and these often need careful management to ease the transitional burden on students (Thomas, 2002).

Aside from building appropriate approaches to offer students support at these critical periods, the cultural diversity within the student population creates the additional challenge of how this support is packaged and delivered to meet disparate student preferences (Crosling et al 2009). Indeed, while some students seek face-to-face support, others are less comfortable with this and so prefer peer-support or email interaction. Further sets of students may opt to seek out their own support, provided resources are available to do so. Comfort in seeking and receiving support is a fundamental aspect of successful student support and so this is a key consideration (Lang, 2002). Therefore, various approaches are required for delivery through different channels and platforms to ensure that student needs and expectations are being met throughout and across our international student community. The effect of this is more effective support provision that addresses a greater cross section of the modern student body (Crosling et al 2009; Lang, 2002).

Of course, this requires significant investment of time in identifying and understanding the cohort and the challenges associated, so that these flexible strategies can be appropriately tailored for purpose. The precise profile varies from one context to another, and this paper describes the strategy tool box developed specifically to address a critical period within the school of medical science degree programmes at the University of Aberdeen,

**Level 3 transition in medical sciences at the University of Aberdeen**

A key problematic transition within the medical science programmes at the University of Aberdeen was identified at college level by the retention and progression committee. This was associated with high levels of student losses during level 3 (of the 4 year Honours programme). Indeed, as many as 13% of the level 3 cohort were listed as discontinued in academic year 2009/10 and this was deemed far from satisfactory at both a local and institutional level.

To counteract this, an investigation of the driving forces behind these losses was carried out and the following reasons deemed to be critical contributors to student discontinuation:

- Increased workload and expectation
- Change to essay-style examinations
- Pressures to enhance portfolio with extra-curricular experience
- Diverse student needs in terms of the delivery of support and guidance

The cumulative effects of these factors was deemed to have a major impact on student success, leading to the precipitation of stress-related health issues reported by previous students who had failed to progress beyond level 3. Indeed this anecdotal evidence was reinforced by teaching and support staff reports and many students indicated that early intervention would have potentially prevented their discontinuation of study.

Using this broadly accumulated evidence and analysis, and also strategies and ideas
discussed at various symposia, a series of strategies were designed to implement as a means of improving retention across the School at level 3. A primary facet of the approach was the delivery and management of sustained support and guidance through a variety of means that would meet the diverse needs of the student population indicated above. Furthermore, students indicated having constant sources of support would encourage them to report problems early, perhaps before they became barriers to success at level 3.

The design of the level 3 transition tool box

The designed strategies, their associated rationale and a measure of student engagement with each activity are displayed in table 1 below. Individual strategies were designed to inform students of challenges, but also to make them aware of opportunities, with this balance facilitating success, engagement and student development across level 3. Furthermore, encouraging students to think about developing their experience portfolios was also emphasized amongst these measures. Additionally, channels for specific advice and support were made available to address student preferences for seeking guidance and to develop clear lines of communication for students with any queries.

The virtual learning environment (VLE) was central in delivering these strategies, firstly as a means of communication and secondly, as a repository for an ever expanding bank of resources. This was continually populated throughout the year and rolled over from one year to the next so as to deliver evolving and tailored information for level 3 students. Such a library of guidance was very widely accessed by students providing opportunities to browse or for targeted searches by proactive students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Engagement measure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A &quot;welcome to level 3&quot; event</td>
<td>Informal introduction to the challenges, opportunities and support at level 3</td>
<td>Begins level 3 on a positive, communicative manner</td>
<td>Huge draw for students, with between 75-85% of level 3 students attending the event in the 3 years it has taken place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VLE sites</td>
<td>Online resource package populated with signposts, resources, hints and tips</td>
<td>Constant, remotely available resource/support hub</td>
<td>The VLE site has been widely utilised by students, with an average of 1000 registered “hits” per year, from a cohort of around 250-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly drop-in sessions</td>
<td>Face-to-face sessions providing a surgery for academic or pastoral problems</td>
<td>Opportunity to discuss issues and develop plans to prevent these issues becoming more serious</td>
<td>The drop-in sessions have been in high demand, with typically around 300 students appearing for advice each semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announcement forum</td>
<td>Alerts relevant to level 3 (e.g. NHS shadowing experience, summer internships, UCAS deadlines)</td>
<td>To inform students of the positive, enriching aspects of level 3</td>
<td>The announcement forum was the most commonly visited aspect of the VLE site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The level 3 experience”</td>
<td>Previous students describe level 3 activities, successes and opportunities</td>
<td>To allow students to inform students of exciting and beneficial activities within level 3</td>
<td>The event was very widely attending (approximately 100 students in attendance), with feedback and the discussion session suggesting students found this useful and very interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The School Careers Conference”</td>
<td>An event with input from a variety of professions relating to career choices</td>
<td>To provide students with a tangible, vocational endpoint to their studies, as this can be a positive encourager for engagement.</td>
<td>The conference was very widely attended (approximately 150 students attended), with students and staff feedback suggesting this was immensely useful.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Details of developed retention strategies.

These strategies have since been adopted by various other areas of the University of Aberdeen, where there was an identified need i.e. a retention tool to solve a specific discontinuation problem.

Additional measures

In addition to implementing this collective approach, two additional actions were undertaken with a less formal and measurable basis:

- Effective communication with course coordinators to identify any students that were beginning to show signs of disengagement (e.g. poor attendance, failure to submit assessments, low assessment grades) to permit early intervention. More recently, this part of the role has been partly automated using Retention Centre, which is part of the Blackboard VLE functionality that monitors student engagement with the VLE.

- Surveying teaching staff on their experiences of level 3 as undergraduates was used as means of generating an advice bank that students could consult. A staff response rate of over 75% meant that the survey was well informed by a variety of teaching staff, and this represents a valid and broad pool of experience to draw upon. Results were published on the level 3 specific VLE and around 250 students accessed these in the first term (from a cohort of around 300), and therefore large numbers of students were interested in this resource. Some examples of questions and responses are included in table 2 below:
The results of the above questionnaire were published anonymously and also in condensed format as a means of presenting these data as tried and tested advice for students during this critical period. These were amongst the most commonly visited areas tracked on the VLE sites.

**Table 2: Staff survey questions and selected answers.**

In addition to the indicated parameters in table 1 that suggest student engagement and use of these resources, retention figures are an increasingly used measure of the student experience. Such metrics are often used as comparators between institutions and as devices for producing institution league tables. As such, these data provide a more substantive measure of success in terms of these interventions. The data in figure 1 demonstrate a year-on-year decline in student discontinuation since these measures were introduced with current retention across this previous problem cohort in excess of 98%, a 10-fold reduction in student loss across 3 academic years.
Figure 1: Quantitative assessment of the impact of the retention strategies

Clear gain in terms of students being retained is evident in figure 1, suggesting these measures are having a significant and demonstrable effect on this critical stage. The successes described here provided the drive to disseminate this design and its principles more broadly as a means of guiding retention strategies more broadly.

Dissemination and best practice sharing

At a local level, the above case study was used to provide basis to justify funding for a retention symposium run at an institutional level. The rationale was to promote sharing of best practice across all areas of the University and to also fund external input to further develop the impact and collaboration involved with broader strategies. Indeed, this has now become an established annual event with 4-5 local speakers and an external keynote speaker. The delegates at these events consistently provide positive feedback and advocate the usefulness and success of the strategy and indeed many of the measures described above are now installed within disparate areas of the University. Typical feedback is presented in table 3:
Additionally, dissemination at a wider level has further honed and developed ongoing strategy at the University and also across the UK higher education sector. Best practice sharing and collaborative activities are among the most important drivers shaping support strategy, and informing progressive academic development. Furthermore, the main beneficiaries of this enhanced approach are the students themselves, both those who face continuation problems and also those without such problems. The latter benefit from the established community atmosphere, the confidence that support is clearly available if required and a wider sense of security and belonging.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, the above case study demonstrates valid design, approach, implementation and maintenance of strategies aimed at reducing attrition rates amongst students. While this is a targeted niche intervention, the underpinning rationale and the driving factors are more broadly applicable. Indeed, these demonstrate the complexity of this aspect of academic practice in light of increased student numbers, expectations, diversity and associated pressures. A one approach fits all strategy is clearly inappropriate given this, and so tailored support and delivery is required in order to address this measure of university performance in delivering a secure and valuable student experience. The delivery platform is equally as important on account of the cultural diversity prevalent within the international student population, and so in addition to developing different strategies there is a requirement to make these available via different media.

An approach such as this is a considerable investment of time and effort, but the product is a repository of flexible, adaptable tools that can be utilized locally, institutionally or on a broader scale to manage key transitions. Therefore, this resource is both an evolving and sustainable approach that has proven highly successful. Recognition of the heterogeneous needs and approaches of the students underpins these strategies and is a vital consideration in terms of implementing these as a means of transitional support.

**References**

