

Liz Thomas
associates
Higher education research and consultancy

Successful transitions
Lessons from UK research and practice
🐦 @ProfLizThomas



About me



My experience

- Professor of Higher Education at Edge Hill University.
- Director of the *What works? Student retention and success programme*.
- Part of the team researching student drop-out and completion in Europe.
- PI examining a whole institution approach to widening participation.
- Author of ten books, and many journal articles and briefings.

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Aims and objectives

The overall aim is to learn from UK research and implementation about improving the transition of students into higher education (HE). Addressing questions such as:

- What makes a good transition?
- How can you help students to get to know each other?
- How can you improve the interaction between staff and students?
- How do you develop students' capacity to engage?
- How can you increase the relevance of the student experience to promote engagement?

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Overview

- Transition into HE: What are the issues?
- *What works? Student retention and success programme*: Improving student engagement, belonging, retention and success.
- Causes of early withdrawal and characteristics of effective interventions.
- Examples of effective transition activities.
- Checklist of effective practice.

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Factors contributing to a poor transition - and withdrawal

Literature tells us the following factors contribute to a poor transition (and higher likelihood of withdrawal):

- Preparation for higher education.
- Institutional and course match.
- Academic issues.
- Lack of social integration and engagement.
- Personal issues and circumstances.

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What works? Student retention and success

Phase 1



Phase 2



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What works? Student retention and success

- NAO (2007) and PAC (2008): Lack of progress and lack of evidence about what works to improve retention in HE.
- £1 million (Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE) to support 7 projects involving 22 HEIs to identify, evaluate and disseminate effective practice.
- The primary purpose of the programme is to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation about the most effective practices to ensure high continuation and completion rates.
- 2012-16 working with 13 HEIs and 43 discipline teams to improve retention and attainment – and research the process and outcomes.
- The aim was to both extend knowledge about what works, and to develop understanding about how to implement change in complex organisations.

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Defining retention and success: English definitions

- “The first is the ‘completion rate’ – the proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies until they obtain their qualification, with no more than one consecutive year out of higher education. As higher education courses take years to complete, an expected completion rate is calculated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency... A more immediate measure of retention is the proportion of an institution’s intake which is enrolled in higher education in the year following their first entry to higher education. This is the ‘continuation rate.’” (NAO, 2007, p5).
- The average non-continuation rate was 6.3% for degree entrants to English higher education institutions in 2014/15.

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Key messages

- At the heart of student retention and success is a **strong sense of belonging in HE for all students**. This is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students engage in.
- The **academic sphere is the most important site** for nurturing participation of the type which engenders a sense of belonging. This puts high quality **inclusive student-centred learning and teaching** at the heart of effective student retention and success.
- In order to maximise the success of all students a **whole institution approach** is required, this requires an inclusive organisational culture and structure, underpinned by data and research.

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Student belonging is an outcome of...

- Supportive **peer relations**.
- Meaningful **interaction between staff and students**.
- Developing **knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners.
- An HE experience which is **relevant to interests and future goals**."

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Engagement

"When we talk about student engagement, it depends a bit about who you're talking to..."

"It's about being an active student in university life rather than, perhaps, a passive student. They don't have to be involved in everything, but it's about being active in class and being aware of student life. It's also about engaging via social media. It's about being part of it, rather than expecting university maybe just to happen."

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Different spheres of student engagement

- **Academic:** Engagement in their own learning.
- **Enhancement:** Engagement in co-curricular and enhancement activities (including representation, curriculum design and leadership roles) which contribute to personal and professional development; and
- **Social:** Engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers.

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Engagement

Coates (2007, p122) describes engagement as “a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience”, comprising the following:

- active and collaborative learning;
- participation in challenging academic activities;
- formative communication with academic staff;
- involvement in enriching educational experiences;
- feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities

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Belonging

Students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual. (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25)

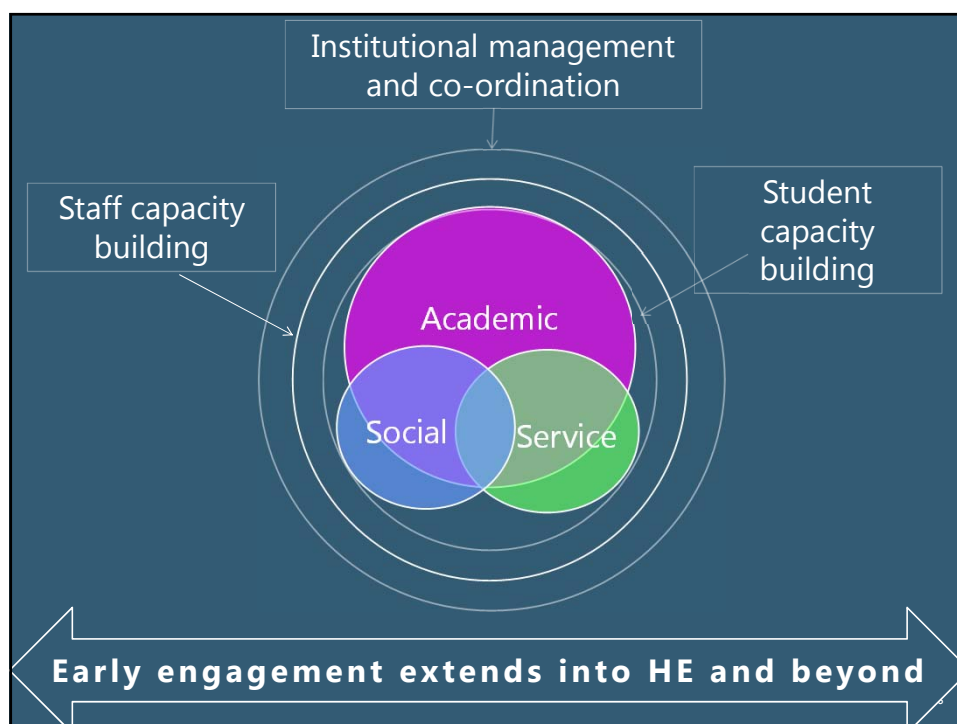
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Belonging

A student from the dominant social class `encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a ``fish in water... it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 127).

Conversely, a student from a non-traditional background may feel like `a fish out of water', and thus return to their familiar habitus.

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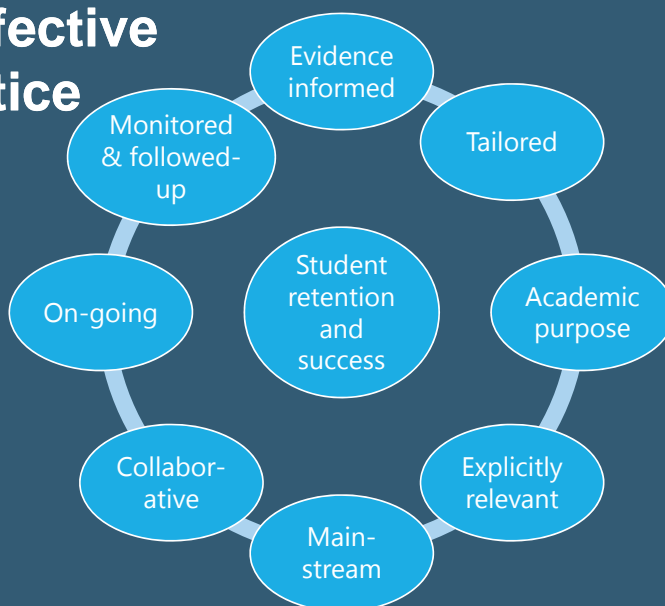


Characteristics of effective interventions and approaches



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Revised features of effective practice



Engaging all students

Research literature and experience finds that some students face additional challenges with engagement, including:

- International students
- Students with disabilities
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning students
- Students from minority religious groups
- Racial/ethnic minority students
- Gender minority students in different contexts
- Commuter/part-time/transfer/mature students
- Low-income and first-generation students.

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Differential engagement and belonging: WW?2 survey

- Male students tend to be less engaged than their female peers.
- Older students (aged 20 and above) tend to be more engaged than younger students.
- White British students tend to exhibit a stronger sense of 'belongingness' than other respondents.
- Students who are not relatively disadvantaged by their circumstances tend to exhibit a stronger sense of 'belongingness' than those whose circumstances are more disadvantageous (including travelling to study, care responsibilities and limited access to a quiet place where they can do academic work).

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A closer look at disadvantaged circumstances

- Having a part-time job whilst studying: No impact on engagement or belonging (69% of students had a PT job)
- Travel time to/from the university: Modest negative impact on belonging (but not engagement)
- Care for dependants: Positive impact on engagement
- Not having a quiet place in which to do academic work: Negative impact on engagement and belonging.
- Declaring a disability: Very little impact.

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Commuter students

- Research with commuter students (interviews with 60 students from 9 institutions) found that a trip to the university or college needs to be worth while.
- Commuter students prioritise academic engagement, and view themselves as good students.
- They only choose limited forms of enhancement engagement, often linked to academic dept.
- Social engagement is not seen to have a value.
- Commuter students have less good student outcomes.

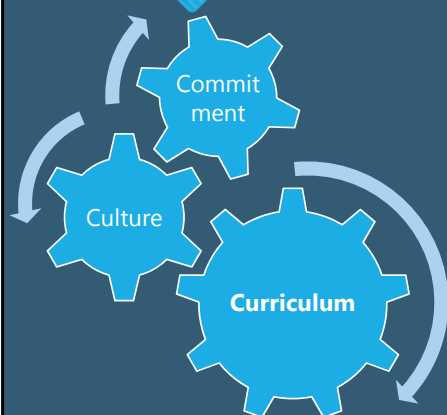
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Black and Minority Ethnic students

- BME students have lower rates of belonging in HE.
- BME students have lower attainment in HE (~20 percentage points below white students).
- They are also more likely to be commuter students.
- BME students have the same attitude to engaging.
- The curriculum can be less relevant, they don't always understand the culture and norms of HE, and are treated differently.

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Using the curriculum



"...curriculum is what all students have in common, irrespective of their diversity, and is within our institutional control..." (Kift et al 2010, p14)

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Transition pedagogy

"A transition pedagogy intentionally and proactively takes account of and seeks to mediate the reality of commencing cohorts diverse in preparedness and cultural capital. The concern is that, if we do not harness and centralise the curriculum in the student experience, student take-up of our otherwise disparate and piecemeal efforts to support their FYE (first year experience) is left to chance. In the face of increasing diversity, equal opportunity for success delivered through the curriculum is within our institutional control and, quite simply, is our legal and moral responsibility," (Kift et al 2010, p12).

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Inclusive approach

An inclusive approach is student-centred and proactive. It: *... necessitates a shift away from supporting specific student groups through a discrete set of policies or time-bound interventions, towards equity considerations being embedded within all functions of the institution and treated as an ongoing process of quality enhancement. Making a shift of such magnitude requires cultural and systemic change at both the policy and practice levels.* (May and Bridger, 2010, p.6)

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Effective interventions

Most effective transition interventions **combine** these roles:

- Providing information
- Informing expectations
- Developing academic skills
- Building social capital
- Nurturing a sense of belonging

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T-shirt induction activity	
Implementation	Fun, semi-structured approach to group formation during induction in engineering
Mainstream	Activity takes place as part of academic induction for all level 1 students.
Proactive	All students participate.
Relevant	It is led by senior lecturer as part of the course. Groups then undertake projects.
Well-timed & appropriate media	During first week. Emphasis is on forming groups rather than providing information.
Collaborative	Promotes peer interaction and group working. Structured to promote mixing.
Monitored*	Qualitative feedback and review of data. Are non-participants followed up?

T-shirt induction	
Outcomes	Surveys and focus groups with students and analysis of institutional data
Peer relations	Groups continued to work and socialise together one year later (58%)
Interaction with staff*	Opportunity to get to know a key member of staff.
Developing capacity	Students help each other (44% reported receiving help)
Relevant to current/future goals*	Group working in the curriculum, and relevant to engineering employment.
Sense of belonging	Created a belonging always or mostly (81%)
Retention & success	Better retention rates year on year (85-94%) & compared to other engineering schools.

Student voices

- "...it kind of makes....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."
- "First year is bad because you don't know anyone....if you don't set up the design group you have got to make friends, where are you going to make friends kind of thing....well you wouldn't usually.....and if it was all individual work. You have to stick around to do the work and obviously if it is group work you are forced to meet people....".
- "...I think if you are part of the kind of group then if, if you are going to drop out then.... or if you are struggling academically then you have got people there to support you as well".

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Local field trip, Tourism

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Implementation	Compulsory local field trips during induction
Mainstream	Part of academic induction for all level 1 students.
Proactive	Compulsory so all students participate.
Relevant	Helps students get to know the local area and is relevant to their study.
Well-timed & appropriate media	At the start of the year. Practical learning activity.
Collaborative	Involves programme staff and students work in groups.
Monitored*	Are non-participants followed up? 31

Local field trip, Tourism

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Outcomes	Focus groups with students and analysis of institutional data
Peer relations	Students got to know each other and support each other.
Interaction with staff	Students got to know members of staff.
Developing capacity	Provided students with experiences to inform studying.
Relevant to current/future goals	Field trips referred to and used in first year curriculum.
Sense of belonging	Created a sense of belonging even for local students.
Retention & success	Progression remained constant (82-86%) despite doubling of cohort.


Student voices

- Local students felt isolated and that students in accommodation were better integrated: "It's mostly all the halls, like everyone staying in halls and then local people" .
- Students felt that the field trip "strengthens the whole group on a social basis" and this in turn "created a positive environment within the class" .
- "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."

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Problem-based learning in groups 	
Implementation	Core level 1 course using problem-based learning in groups of 8 students.
Mainstream	This is part of mainstream curriculum.
Proactive	All students participate, and group work is assessed.
Relevant	Relevant to current learning and team working in employment.
Well-timed & appropriate media	During first week. Emphasis is on forming groups rather than providing information.
Collaborative	Uses the academic sphere to facilitate social integration. Staff work with groups of 8 students.
Monitored*	Qualitative feedback and review of data.

Problem-based learning in groups 	
Outcomes	Surveys and focus groups with students and analysis of institutional data
Peer relations	Students worked in groups outside of the classroom and made friends.
Interaction with staff*	Opportunity to get to know staff in small groups.
Developing capacity	Supported to work in groups through coaching and other staff support.
Relevant to current/future goals.	Able to relate to own experiences and interests.
Sense of belonging	Created a sense of belonging.
Retention & success	Better retention rates year on year from 77% to 85%.

Student voices

- "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."
- "[...]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."

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Assignment briefs

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Implementation	Students discuss brief, ask questions and lecturer clarifies.
Mainstream	Delivered as a taught session
Proactive	All students participate.
Relevant	Students report spending more time understanding the brief than doing the assignment; source of anxiety.
Well-timed & appropriate media	Takes place prior to assessment, and face to face. Post-it notes for anonymity.
Collaborative	Emphasis on unpacking and clarifying the brief collectively in a structured way.
Monitored	Unknown

Assignment briefs


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Outcomes	Qualitative research and attainment.
Peer relations	Students share concerns and questions in a more formal/structured context.
Interaction with staff	Facilitates all students to have interaction about assessment with staff.
Developing capacity	Develops capacity in relation to specific assignment and more generally.
Relevant to current/future goals.	Students are very motivated by assessment, and so highly relevant.
Sense of belonging	Felt increased confidence and empowerment.
Retention & success	Increase in grades and number of submissions of assignments.

Student voices

- 'It was good, it made me feel more confident'
- 'We don't want spoon feeding; but from this we know we're on the right track'
- 'You knew what to do so you could just get on with it'
- 'I felt that I could do it'

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 PASS System	
Implementation	Group tutorials developing academic skills and relationships with staff and students.
Mainstream	Part of the compulsory skills module.
Proactive	All students participate; those who are failing are followed up one-to-one.
Relevant	Assessed coursework set through PASS contributes 30% of the module assessment.
Well-timed & appropriate media	Meet 4-5 times per semester; more frequent meeting in first semester. Face-to-face and text book.
Collaborative	Emphasis on learning with each other and from each other.
Monitored	Attendance monitored and followed-up.

 PASS System	
Outcomes	Student survey, interviews, focus groups; attendance monitoring; and data.
Peer relations	Students learn from each other and feel more confident.
Interaction with staff	89% reported sufficient contact with staff through PASS; 88% confident now to ask for academic help.
Developing capacity	Develop skills of all students; including failing students.
Relevant to current/future goals.	Taught by academics from their discipline, so perceived as relevant
Sense of belonging	Shows that the dept cares/they belong.
Retention & success	83% in 2004-05 to 92% in 2007-08.

Student voices

- [We] learn how others are feeling about the course and how they are getting on. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly and that helps everyone have a voice, which is important for those who wouldn't speak up in a lecture.
- Made me feel... that there were people to talk to if needed.
- I feel it is a great system to get to know your academic advisor and this makes me feel more involved in the Life Science department.

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Conclusions

- **Prioritise developing student capacity for transition through social engagement with an academic purpose.**
- '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' (Vinson et al. 2010, p133).

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Conclusions

- **Developing engagement and belonging is important in all transitions.**
- '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' (Severiens & Schmidt, 2009, p.60).

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Reflective checklist

1. To what extent is transition work focused on social engagement and developing social capital (contacts or networks to draw on), rather than on provision of information?
2. How early are you starting to build meaningful relationships with and between students, so that they know who to ask if they need information or support?
3. To what extent do your transition activities have an overt academic purpose? Could the academic element be increased? In what ways are academic members of staff involved in transition activities?
4. Do you have sufficient structured opportunities for students to get to know members of staff? Is this sufficient to enable students to get to know staff and be able to ask for information or support?

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Reflective checklist

5. To what extent do pre- and post-entry transition activities facilitate students getting to know peers from the same course or programme? Is there a structured approach to encourage mixing outside of their comfort zones?
6. Does your transition programme make the benefits of academic and social engagement explicit to students and provide them with skills and opportunities to engage?
7. To what extent do transition activities build on and relate to students' diverse interests, experiences and backgrounds?
8. In what ways is the relevance of the course or programme of study to students' future aspirations made explicit both pre- and post-entry?

Liz Thomas
 associates
 Higher education research and consultancy

Thank you

- Thank you for listening.
- Please get in touch if you would like to discuss anything:
liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk or
 visit www.lizthomasassociates.co.uk



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 associates
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Evidence base/references

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associates
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