

**0144**

## **Can entry profiles be predictors of retention and success of HE students within an FE context?**

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### **Research Questions**

With the post-Dearing developments in education leading to an expansion of delivery of Higher Education qualifications in Further Education colleges (NCIHE, 1997), it is necessary to reflect on these changes and monitor the outcomes. The advent of the Foundation Degree in trans-disciplinary subjects with a more vocational slant are offering greater opportunities for non-traditional learners to study to HE level than ever before (Watson and Taylor, 1998).

Although the government may be encouraged by the 12% increase in participation in HE between 2002 and 2006 (HESA, 2007), the impact of the policy making should not be measured by the numbers of HE student registrations, but rather the increase in students successfully completing these qualifications. To this end this paper will examine attrition rates within Higher Education courses and try to offer some explanations that may help in recruitment procedures.

### **Methods**

Data were obtained for 457 students enrolled on stage 1 of over 27 Foundation Degrees and HNDs at a Southwest tertiary college. Entry characteristics were extracted from the UCAS application forms, which included the course that the student was registered on, and demographic data including age at application and gender. An indication of the student's educational path was observed by looking at the date of their UCAS or clearing application. Students' educational background was established using their last qualification type and subject, and how long ago this qualification was completed. The students' entry level was measured according to UCAS points on application.

The entry data were then matched to the outcome using data from Award Board results at the end of stage 1. Three possible outcomes were possible; completed, withdrawn or failed. Those deemed to have completed were those allowed progression on to stage 2; withdrawn students were those who had chosen not to complete that academic year at a point prior to the award board; failure was defined as those who could not progress onto stage 2 as an outcome of the award board.

At no point were names attached to entry data or outcomes and the anonymity of all students was preserved.

### **Frame**

Previous academic background

Analysis of the last qualification type that the student had experienced showed that the type of entry qualification did not seem to play a significant role in the outcome. A-Level students were more likely to complete and least likely to fail, and persevered for the longest before withdrawing. Vocational students were more likely to withdraw than other entry routes. The students transferring from other HE programmes were also highly likely to pass and less likely to withdraw. Those that enrolled without recent educational experience withdrew earlier than those with qualifications, and most likely to fail.

With regards to the impact of achievement at the point of entry, those who completed their course had achieved a thirty point higher UCAS point on entry than those who withdrew and failed.

Of the retained students, Access students achieved higher grades, and GNVQ students were the least successful achieving ten percent less on average.

#### Age differences

A positive significant relationship was found between age and end of year grade, where the mature students achieved a significantly higher end of year grade (65%) than the younger students (57%).

#### Gender differences

Significant gender differences were found, where females were more likely to complete than males and males were more likely to withdraw than females, but factors that may have affected this success might be that females were significantly older than males and that women had a significantly higher entry level indicated by their UCAS points.

#### Educational outcomes

A Discriminant Analysis was conducted on 361 cases from the three outcome groups to establish whether there were predictors of Completion, Withdrawal and Failure. The results suggested a significant difference between the Completed and Non-completed groups but no significant difference between the Failed and Withdrawn groups. The greatest predictor of educational outcome was that of UCAS points on entry between completing and non-completing students.

#### **Research findings**

The most conclusive characteristic as a predictor of retention and achievement was that of previous academic level, as indicated by UCAS grades. Students completing the first year and progressing onto year two of the Fd/HND had a 20% higher UCAS score on entry, whereas there was no difference between the UCAS level of those who have failed and those who withdrew. This is interesting because at the point of data collection, those students referred to as failed may have subsequently progressed to the second year after completing referral work over the summer period.

Age was also a factor that appeared to contribute to the higher levels of retention and success. Arguably, what the mature students miss out on in terms of academic background, they make up for with life experience and transferable skills. Many jobs will require you to organise, plan and execute even the simplest projects, as well as establishing the consequences of not doing this efficiently. These are the types of skills that may help students with an untraditional learner background become more successful than their younger counterparts.

At the point of data collection Access students were not part of the UCAS tariff so the author plans to replicate this work when such data becomes available in order to have a clearer idea of the impact that the entry level plays on success and retention.

Results from this research have led to trial skills-based interventions within several HE programs to help address issues of early withdrawal and reduce failures.