21st International Conference on First Year Experience  
Dublin, Ireland  23-26 June 2008

Guiding lights: Enhancing student retention through student support and student ambassadors

21st International FYE Conference  
Dublin 23-26 June 2008

Stephanie Fleischer & Marilyn Doust

Why is retention an issue?

• Performance indicator for institutions
• Widening participation
• Government target to bear down on non-completion  
  (Department for Education and Skills, 2002: 14)
• Expansion of higher education
• Student success

What does the literature tell us?

• National Audit Office 2007
• House of Commons 2008
• Student experience (Tinto 2002, Yorke and Thomas 2003)
• Role of Teaching and Learning to improve student retention in HE (Crosling et al 2008)
• Process of establishing friendship networks  
  (Thomas 2002, Wilcox et al 2005)

Understanding the needs of a changing student population

• Annual retention report
• Information for prospective students
• Resources for students and staff
• Clear strategic commitment to retention

Survey early leavers

• Withdrawal survey
• Annual report
• Student Support and Guidance tutors
• Retention research in Schools

Support through academic provision

• Personal Development Planning
• Training and support for Personal Tutors
• Student Support and Guidance Tutors to complement personal tutoring
• Specialist support services

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Share good practice

- Institutional Retention Review Group
- Retention conference for staff
- Knowledge exchange with external experts
- SSGT and student support network
- ‘On the right path’ website
  http://student.brighton.ac.uk/thinkingofleaving/

Retention interventions at the University of Brighton

- Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT)
- The Chelsea School model (SSGT and Student Ambassadors)

Aims of the Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT) Project

- To improve retention of level 1 students
- Research factors affecting withdrawal in this student group
- To identify learning and teaching strategies to enhance student retention

Two strands
- Student Support
- Research into the first year student experience

Student numbers in SASS

Student Support

- Appointment of a part-time Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT)
- SSGT provides a first point of contact for level 1 students
- SSGT sends text message to all first year students at key times

Student Support and Guidance Tutor (SSGT)

- SSGT is introduced to level 1 students on the first day of term in Induction Week
- Provides a confidential drop-in and appointment service
- Responds to student questions via email/phone/text messaging
- SSGT follows-up level 1 students whose attendance is poor or who fail to submit assessed work
- Refers students to Student Services or Academic Staff if necessary
- Complements Personal Tutoring
Issues Raised by students

- Financial issues
- Personal problems
- Course related worries: study skills, regulations and procedures
- Withdrawal, intermission, course transfer
- Health problems
- Accommodation
- Disabilities

![Graph showing L1 non-continuation rates for School of Applied Social Science](image)

Quotes from Students

“...told me what I needed to do and where I needed to go, it was fine.”
(Female, 23)

“I don’t think I would have done half the things I have done now, if she [the SSGT] hadn’t like told me they were there.”
(Male, 22)

SSGT roll-out

- Ongoing liaison with SSGTs in involved schools
- Links to other support networks within the university (Student Services, Student Union)
- Information exchange
- Training

Chelsea School model

Student Support Tutor

Ambassadors

pre-entry applicants

post entry students

in person

remotely

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• “Make as much information as possible available”
• “Engage with students before they actually arrive”
• “Adopt a welcoming attitude to students”
• “Advise students according to the students’ best interests, not the institution’s”


Purpose
To improve conversion rates and retention through a co-ordinated scheme of advice and support from pre-entry to end of year one

The Model

Student Support Tutor

Pre-entry
- Newsletters
- Student Ambassadors
- Open Days & Visits
- Campus Tours
- Parents

Post-entry
- Induction
- Advice/information
- Drop-in Appointment
- Link to other support services

Pre-entry

Social Processes

Academic Purpose

Post-entry

Social Processes

Academic Purpose
Student Ambassadors

Benefits of Ambassadors

- Harness applicants’ interest in current student views
- Offer more targeted and relevant information
- Increase conversion of applicants
- Enrol students who are better informed about their choice of University/Course

The Student Ambassadors

**In person**
- Open days (2 University 25 School)
- Campus tours
- Occasional external visits
- Induction
- Student question time

**Remotely**
- Newsletter input
- Email contact with applicants

Evaluation of pre-entry role

Chelsea Applications Data July 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ambassador contact</th>
<th>No ambassador contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firm 421</td>
<td>274 (65%)</td>
<td>147 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance 266</td>
<td>86 (32%)</td>
<td>180 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined 896</td>
<td>84 (9.4%)</td>
<td>812 (90.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

444 students requested email contact from a student ambassador

421 students (65%) with ambassador contact

32% of 444 students (86 students) requested email contact from a student ambassador

Evaluation of pre-entry role

“…thanks to Rachel the 2nd year ambassador who gave my son and I a very professional and informative tour, especially as we arrived a half hour late…”
(from a mother)

“…My son had his sights set on another uni but having spoken with ‘real’ students he wants to come to Brighton….”
(from a father)
Evaluation of pre-entry role

"...I'm an international student...how do I go about choosing fall courses?...term dates/exam dates...my mom needs to book flights..." (USA applicant)

"...I wasn't going to come to the Open Day but the newsletter encouraged me to attend and I love it..." (Sport and Exercise Science applicant)

"...it felt like I was there already...." (Sport and Leisure applicant)

"...inspiring...it has given me motivation to succeed..." (Sport and Exercise Science applicant)

Working well

- Recruitment of ambassadors
- Ambassador commitment
- Feedback from applicants, parents, admission staff
- Input into newsletter
- Familiarity with Student Support Tutor when new students arrive
- Student 'question time'
- Parent 'question time'

Working less well

- Formalisation of ambassador role very time consuming
- Stopping casual use of ambassadors
- Shifting inward-looking control by courses to a School perspective

The next steps

- Mainstream into School admissions and support structure
- Senior ambassadors
- Tracking students who opted for an ambassador (current first year)
- University transitions project to track students from point of application through the first year
- More external visits

Conclusion

Successful first phase

- Applicant and parent satisfaction
- Improvement in retention and conversion rate indicated

Key features

- Ambassadors & newsletters to achieve familiarity with the School community from the applicants' perspectives
- Student support tutor to manage links and provide a known face for subsequent support

Future

- Continuous evaluation of SSGT and Chelsea School model
- Roll out SSGT to all schools and Partner Colleges
- Improve advice on perspective students
- Develop cross-school retention and transition research

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