The contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success

A literature synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive

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The contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success. A literature synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success National Programmes Archive.

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## Contents

1. Core definition of synthesis themes ................................................................. 3
2. Summary ............................................................................................................. 3
3. Explanatory context .......................................................................................... 4
4. Methods ............................................................................................................ 5
5. Key research reports ........................................................................................ 6
6. Synthesis of research findings .......................................................................... 9
   6.1. Transition support for non-traditional learners ............................................ 11
   6.2. Pre-entry interventions to support the transition of disabled students .......... 11
   6.3. Familiarisation and preparedness ................................................................. 12
   6.4. Pre-entry information and guidance ............................................................. 13
7. Implications for policy and practice ................................................................. 14
8. Gaps and areas for future research .................................................................. 15
9. References ........................................................................................................ 15
1. Core definition of synthesis themes

Central to this synthesis are three key terms: ‘retention’, ‘success’ and ‘pre-entry intervention’. None of these terms are straightforward however.

Retention

Within this synthesis retention has been conceptualised as part of an active process and not just as an outcome to be quantified. Although course completion is an important measure of success, students who choose to leave higher education (HE) can sometimes be seen to have made an informed choice (Yorke, 2000; Quinn et al., 2005). Key to retention then is an understanding of the many factors that may cause a student to leave a course prior to completion. These factors may interplay in complex ways and vary for different groups of students, with different needs and according to changing circumstances.

Success

The notion of success in relation to HE is also complex as it needs to be conceptualised differently according to the point that a student is at in “the student lifecycle” (Thomas, 2011, p. 11). For those working at pre-entry level there is unsurprisingly a stronger focus on access and transition than on retention and post-graduation opportunities, although all of these are important. Key to any definition of success is that all students are able to improve their future life chances in equal measure through their experiences of HE.

Pre-entry interventions

The term ‘pre-entry intervention’ is also open to interpretation. In its broadest sense it can be seen to refer quite generally to any point in time prior to the commencement of a course of study at a higher education institution (HEI). However, it can also be used more specifically to refer to the phase that immediately precedes entry. Conceptualised in this way issues relating to transition are foregrounded as are the specific strategies and processes developed to facilitate students’ successful academic and social integration into HE in the future.

2. Summary

The overarching question that has guided the development of this synthesis has been: What is the contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success? In order to address this, two sub-questions were identified:

- What factors are known to be associated with improved student retention and to feed into their success?
- What is the evidence to show that these factors are successfully addressed by pre-entry interventions?

The areas addressed by pre-entry interventions have the potential to support student retention and success as they have commonly targeted those groups of learners at greater risk of early withdrawal. These interventions also overlap with areas that studies in the archive suggest are associated with an increased risk of early withdrawal.

Factors identified as being associated with improved student retention and success include:

- a good fit between the young person’s prior expectations and those within the HE context;
- academic preparedness, sufficient to meet course demands;
- social integration within the HE context;
- access to additional support to meet specific needs;
- the development of a robust learner identity.

One of the most significant issues to emerge in relation to retention is the number of young people who find the transition to HE difficult and think of leaving, far more than actually do so. As this is often linked to academic factors such as a poor initial choice of course, information, advice and guidance work undertaken at the pre-entry stage has the potential to reduce this risk.

The literature explored in this synthesis highlights the diversity of young people entering HE and the importance of developing cross-phase partnerships so that work to support transition can begin at the pre-entry stage. This is particularly important for disabled students who require early induction into the support that is available.

A number of studies in the archive describe interventions carried out at the pre-entry stage that have eased the social transition to university. These have made use of such things as peer mentoring and social networking sites to engender a sense of ‘belonging.’

Although a great deal of work has been undertaken at the pre-entry stage and these interventions have specifically targeted young people belonging to those groups most likely to benefit from a focus on retention and success, further research is needed to evidence the impact of this work.

HEIs need to have in place ongoing processes of institutional monitoring that encourage critical self-reflection and develop nuanced understandings of the diversity of the student population, with a view to embedding these understandings in institutional policies and practices.

The current policy interest in fair access and social mobility needs to reflect an awareness of the different routes into HE, with concerns over limited opportunities for progression framed in ways that more fully reflect the diversity of the student population and a wider range of goals and outcomes.

### 3. Explanatory context

Despite recent changes to the funding of widening participation activity (e.g. in relation to Aimhigher), there is a continuing emphasis at policy level and within HEIs on improving access to universities in England as part of a wider focus on improving opportunities for social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2011). Although HEFCE (2010) has reported that there have been “substantial and sustained increases” (p. 2) in participation by young people from less advantaged areas the reports by Langlands (2005) and the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (2009) suggest that the demographic of students undertaking professional degree programmes is still relatively homogeneous when compared to the wider UK population and that this contributes to differentiated employment outcomes. The causes of this particular form of inequality are rooted in wider social structures and universities working under the regulatory regime of the Office For Fair Access (OFFA) need therefore to focus attention on both the recruitment and retention of students from non-traditional backgrounds, as well as on their longer-term success, in order to maximise their contribution to wider social change.

The notion of success in relation to HE is complex however, as it needs to be conceptualised differently according to the point that a student is at in their HE journey, as well as perhaps in relation to different groups of students. Although participation in HE tends to be constructed as without question the desirable option for all young people, some have positive conceptions of their futures that do not involve progression to HE (Watts and Bridges, 2006; Aynsley and Crossouard, 2010). Nevertheless the access and transition of vocational learners to university remains an important concern as they tend to be overwhelmingly from lower socio-economic backgrounds (HEFCE, 2010), and those who do choose to progress to HE tend to be
restricted to post-92 universities in a limited range of subjects (Hoelscher and Hayward, 2008; Pring et al., 2010), or within dual-sector colleges (Bailey and Bekhradnia, 2008; Bathmaker et al., 2008). Success in HE is therefore complex and multi-dimensional and needs to be considered over time:

... ‘success’ means helping all students to become more engaged and more effective learners in higher education, thus improving their academic outcomes and their progression opportunities after graduation (or when they exit higher education). (Thomas, 2012, p. 12)

Ensuring that young people from non-traditional backgrounds and course entry routes both attain at a level comparable to their peers and are able to improve their future life chances in equal measure is an important indicator of success.

Issues relating to engagement and retention are also of importance as these feed into longer-term success. The report from the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success (WASRS) archive, Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: a summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme (Thomas, 2012), notes that there are two commonly used definitions of retention: staying in higher education (HE) to completion and the proportion of students still in HE a year after first enrolling. Retention is an active process therefore – making actions undertaken to help maintain students on a course of study once they have commenced it of vital importance. Although course completion is an important measure of success, Quinn et al. (2005) argue that leaving prematurely is not necessarily a sign of failure and might be regarded as an informed choice, a point also made by Yorke (2000). Key to retention then is our understanding of the many factors that may cause a student to leave a course prior to completion and an awareness that these factors may interplay in complex ways and vary for different groups of students, with different needs and according to changes in circumstances.

For those learners who do progress to HE, a focus has been on the significance of having a sense of ‘belonging’ and how this intersects with notions of ‘persistence’ (Yorke and Longden, 2004). According to Tinto (2006) low income students are disproportionately academically underprepared for HE however. Holdsworth (2006) has also pointed to how experiences of HE have been affected by living at home while attending university, an increasing trend in the current financial context (Pring et al., 2010). Importantly, Gorard et al. (2006) found that students’ long-term relationships with their academic department and institution stem from and build upon relationships founded during the initial stages, a finding that signals clearly the potential importance of work done at the pre-entry stage.

4. Methods

The overarching question that has guided the development of this synthesis has been: What is the contribution of pre-entry interventions to student retention and success? In order to address this, two sub-questions were identified:

- What factors are known to be associated with improved student retention and to feed into their success?
- What is the evidence to show that these factors are successfully addressed by pre-entry interventions?

This synthesis has also been guided by three main aims:

- to respond to the overarching question;
- to showcase the breadth of material in the WASRS archive, thereby contributing to its life as a sustainable and valuable resource;
to draw out emerging issues for key stakeholders, to guide and challenge the development of future policy and practice as work to improve access and promote social mobility continues under new systems and structures.

Our approach to the very diverse range of literature in the archive has been exploratory with the identification of texts for inclusion in the synthesis taking place over two main stages. The WASRS search box facility on the WASRS homepage of the HEA website was used to identify broad themes relevant to the focus of the synthesis. This first stage of reading led to the development of a more refined list of keywords, which were used to conduct a within-text search of the literature. The terms used were: ‘pre-entry intervention’; ‘pre-entry’ (excluding intervention); ‘induction’; ‘transition’; ‘retention’; ‘retention AND success’; ‘non-completion’; ‘withdrawal’; ‘withdrawal’ (including ‘withdrawn’, ‘withdrawing, etc.’); ‘study support’; ‘disabled learners AND success’; ‘belonging’; ‘pathway’; ‘bridging’ and ‘expectation’. This in-depth search of the WASRS archive provided us with the titles of all texts containing these keywords, the number of times these appeared and their frequency in the text as a percentage. This list of texts was prioritised, leading to the production of a short list of 58, which was then further refined to 19.

Texts identified as providing content relating to pre-entry interventions or with implications for pre-entry interventions were prioritised as were texts focusing on retention specifically. Other aspects that have been considered in the production of the synthesis include: the type and source of the material; the specific population discussed; the aims and nature of any interventions discussed; the evidence of impact on retention or success; the implications for future policy and practice. The key research reports listed in the following section are a sample of the texts examined in this way, selected to provide breadth, depth and variation as well as for their potential usefulness to subsequent users of the archive.

5. Key research reports


This compendium published by the HEA in 2011 focuses specifically on retention and success. Section 1 is concerned with pre-entry and induction and outlines eight interventions. These include:

- an initiative involving student self-evaluation to ensure that those accepting offers of places are well informed about the course (‘The Informed Study Project’, Cardiff University);
- using social networking technology and peer mentoring to build relationships pre-enrolment and to provide information about the university (Northumbria University);
- a website developed to support the transition of disabled students (‘Pathways to Trinity’, Trinity College, Dublin);
- a pre-entry induction programme that enables students with Asperger’s syndrome to familiarise themselves with the university campus and staff (University of Surrey);
- the development of a virtual learning site to provide social and academic support to ease transition, for use with students whose places have been confirmed (‘Countdown to University’, University of Leeds).


Published in July 2012 this is the final report in the What Works? series that focused specifically on retention and success. It provides a discussion of the findings of seven research projects conducted in 22 HEIs using mixed methods. It concludes that the most effective pre-entry interventions focus on:

- providing information;
- informing expectations;
- developing academic skills;
- building social capital (links with peers, current students and staff);
- nurturing a sense of belonging. (Thomas, 2012, p. 22)

It states that efforts to promote ‘belonging’ must start at the pre-entry phase and that this is developed through engagement in both the academic and social spheres.


This particular report from the What Works? series provides a detailed account of research carried out at Anglia Ruskin University between 2009 and 2010 with a view to informing institutional practices to support student retention. A table on page 22 usefully summarises the factors identified as giving rise to thoughts of early withdrawal. These are divided into two broad groups: factors specific to the student and factors specific to the university. The implications of the report for pre-entry interventions include:

- providing good quality, easily accessible information so that students can make really informed choices about their course of study;
- making sure that students know what support systems are available and how to use them;
- making sure that students are prepared for the possibility that they might feel a bit lost initially;
- involving parents and families as they play a large part in supporting students in periods of difficulty;
- preparing students for the demands of more independent study.

An appendix provides copies of the research instruments used in the study – helpful to anyone considering conducting a review of factors affecting retention within their own institution.


This topic briefing is based on a review of the widening participation strategic assessments of 129 HEIs from 2009. It focuses attention on the importance of the induction process, which it argues needs to begin prior to enrolment and to be monitored for its impact on different student groups as part of a university’s duties under equalities legislation. On page 16 there is a list of questions that an institution interested in student retention can ask itself, one of which directly addresses the pre-entry phase.


This study reports on research that focused specifically on disabled young people considered unlikely to choose HE as a future option. The authors found that all of the disabled learners who participated in the project wanted to stay at home or near home while studying in HE, mainly for financial reasons and also because of established support structures. A major finding of the report was that there is generally a lack of information for parents, disabled learners and their advisers about studying at HE, making it difficult to make informed decisions.

The report contains a useful discussion for practitioners of key challenges relating to the representation of young people with disabilities in widening participation interventions at pre-entry level as well as clear recommendations about how to address the key concerns identified.

This very useful resource provides seven case studies relating to pre-entry and induction support for disabled students. The final section addresses the development of good practice by providing clear guidance for practitioners in relation to areas that need to be considered when developing interventions of this type.


This report focuses on how best to retain learners from vocational routes in HE courses. The quantitative data were drawn from a large HESA dataset which allowed an analysis of the entry characteristics of learners progressing into HE, the details of the programmes being studied and the outcomes of the learning, including reasons for leaving and degree class. The qualitative data were gathered through questionnaires and focus groups with vocational learners and staff drawn from four universities and four colleges in the Lifelong Learning Network.

The report, while noting that students entering HE through vocational routes are more likely to be from less socially advantaged backgrounds, concludes that it is too simplistic to say that vocational learners have significantly more negative outcomes in relation to non-completion. However, it is noted that these learners are under-represented among those leaving with first class and upper second class degrees. Implications are drawn for course provision such as that monitoring is necessary to ensure that this group of learners is not at a disadvantage, that the quality of feedback provided to learners is important and that smaller teaching groups are beneficial.

Implications for pre-entry include:

- the provision of information, advice and guidance, e.g. through taster courses;
- the provision of information about sources of support;
- preparing learners to meet the demands of course content and assessment;
- developing learners’ self-confidence;
- cross-phase communication between staff.

All of these measures the report argues will benefit all student groups.


This research report focuses on bridging programmes designed to support the transition from FE to HE across the National Art Learning Network (NALN). It was developed specifically to disseminate good practice, and it contains an interesting and useful analysis of how bridging programmes encourage the development of social capital.

Twelve institutions participated and 19 learners and staff were interviewed. Interviews with young people focused specifically on those who were considered unlikely to choose HE as a future option. It was too early to collect statistical data showing the longer-term impact on retention and completion at the time of writing. However, all of the students interviewed agreed that bridging programmes made transition easier.

Key findings in relation to pre-entry interventions include the importance of cross-phase collaboration and that interventions are valuable if successive and progressive, leading to improvements in areas such as confidence in making an application to HE and increasing familiarisation. In common with a number of other
reports it is argued that all student groups benefit from interventions of this type, not just those specifically targeted as in need of additional support.

6. Synthesis of research findings

This synthesis focuses in particular on the relationship between pre-entry interventions and transition, exploring the potential of this work to support students’ successful academic and social integration into HE. Although the term ‘pre-entry’ in its broadest sense can be seen to refer quite generally to any point in time prior to the commencement of a course of study at a HEI, it can also be used more specifically to refer to the phase that immediately precedes entry:

*Particularly effective interventions are situated in the academic sphere. They start pre-entry, and have an overt academic purpose. Such interventions often develop peer networks and friendships, create links with academic members of staff, provide key information, shape realistic expectations, improve academic skills, develop students’ confidence, demonstrate future relevance, and nurture belonging.* (Thomas, 2012, p. 8)

When pre-entry is conceptualised as a distinct phase in this way issues relating to transition are foregrounded as are the specific strategies and processes developed to facilitate this. These interventions can occur in the departing or the receiving provider and in some cases in both. They are initiated for different purposes and at times to meet the identified needs of specific groups of students. The impact of these interventions is felt most strongly by groups targeted under fair access initiatives at the pre-entry phase; these are also the groups most vulnerable on transition and to early withdrawal.

The material held in the WASRS archive identifies a range of factors as being particularly closely associated with student retention and success. These can be broadly grouped into five main areas:

- students’ understanding of the context and a mismatch between these and those of the institution;
- academic preparedness of the student, including both course specific knowledge and skills and more generic, independent study skills;
- students’ level of social integration in the university context;
- the needs of particular groups of students and their access to additional support;
- the development of a robust learner identity.

One of the most significant issues to emerge in relation to retention is the number of students who find transition difficult, giving rise to thoughts of leaving. For example, one of the reports in the What Works? series, *HERE Project: Higher Education: Retention & Engagement* (Foster et al., 2012), discusses the findings of research conducted in three HEIs that involved the analysis of a student transition survey and institutional tracking data. The research showed that almost a third of students had thought about withdrawing, far more than actually do. Many different reasons were given for this, the most common being academic factors: “Course not as expected” was the second most frequently cited reason after “anxiety about coping” (Foster et al., 2012, p. 101). This report also found that poor initial choice of course was an important factor in early withdrawal. The most important reason given for deciding to stay was the support of family and friends.

There are similar findings in another of the reports in the What Works? series: *A comparative evaluation of the roles of student adviser and personal tutor in relation to undergraduate student retention. Final report*. Anglia Ruskin University. (McCary et al., 2011). A survey of first and second-year students that explored their thoughts on staying at university and the support available to them found that 42% of the 722 students who completed the questionnaire had thought about leaving at some point. This study also found that students felt insufficiently prepared for their course of study with 30.3% saying that they would have valued better pre-entry information. However, 44% said they had not attended course open days or any other type of pre-entry event.
Another significant issue to emerge from these reports is the importance of recognising the support needs of students as sequential and successive. This issue is discussed in the What Works? series report *Good practice in student retention: an examination of the effects of student integration on non-completion*:

_Taken together, our key messages demonstrate the need for a holistic approach to student engagement. This approach continues throughout a student's university career: from initial outreach and contact, through applications and pre-entry, during induction and initial stages, and beyond._ (Boyle et al., 2011, p. 15)

This study also identifies pre-entry as a specific stage and emphasises the importance of implementing measures that encourage the formation of an early peer group to support both social and academic transition from this point onwards. The Action on Access 2011 topic briefing, *Social Mobility through Higher Education: Promoting the Success of all Students*, advocates that success needs to be defined in relation to what it refers to as “a student lifecycle approach” (Thomas, 2011, p. 11) and that there is “an intimate link between pre-entry work aimed at widening participation and improving student retention and success” (ibid., p. 13). It states that there are four reasons why universities need to be concerned about retention: ethical; reputational; economic; and legal. Consequently it stresses the importance of institutions developing monitoring processes that enable differences in the impact of teaching and learning strategies and assessment practices on different groups of students to be identified and addressed. It advocates that this process begin at the pre-entry stage with the identification of students at greater risk of poor outcomes so that support needs can be met as early as possible. It also recommends beginning work on employability at the pre-entry phase as part of a strategy to address differences in progression opportunities.

Facilitating the exchange of information and the development of relationships between current and prospective students is also identified as a critical area. A study in the ‘What Works?’ series, *Peer Mentoring Works! How Peer Mentoring Enhances Student Success in HE* (Andrews and Clark, 2011), found that just under 75% of the students surveyed thought that peer mentoring had helped them to feel part of the university. It suggests that this is most successful when mentoring starts prior to transition and continues beyond the first few weeks. The study in the What Works? series, “Belonging” and “intimacy” factors in the retention of students – an investigation into the student perceptions of effective practice and how that practice can be replicated (Cashmore et al., 2012), suggests that social networking sites are potentially useful as a medium for this (an approach also advocated by Foster et al., 2011). However, a key point made by Boyle et al. (2011), in another of the What Works? series reports, is that full-time mature students and part-time students in particular do not feel able to make time for purely social activity, suggesting that when developing a focus for pre-entry interventions with these groups it is important to build these around an academic focus.

There are two major reasons why areas addressed by pre-entry interventions have the potential to support student retention and success. First, these interventions have commonly targeted those groups of learners at greater risk of early withdrawal. Second, the areas for intervention strongly overlap with areas identified as increasing the risk of early withdrawal. The focus for these interventions include:

- the provision of information, advice and guidance to support the applications and admissions process and progression;
- subject tasters and opportunities to attend events in university contexts;
- activities that provide subject enrichment or develop independent study skills.

In the next section factors identified as being important in student retention and success are explored in more detail in relation to specific pre-entry interventions. However, it is important to note that these often address a number of factors and that they do not generally address their impact on retention specifically.
6.1. Transition support for non-traditional learners

The final report of the Staffordshire Lifelong Learning Network project, *Retention of Vocational and Work-Based Learners* (Rout, 2011), provides evidence that shows that the level of social disadvantage in a student’s background impacts both upon entry routes to HE and on subsequent retention. In relation to retention, in contrast to their A-level counterparts, vocational entrants are more likely to leave for personal and financial reasons. In particular, there are high rates of leaving from HND/C and foundation degrees although, interestingly, there is generally little difference in the leaving rates for entrants whether they are studying in colleges of further education or universities. Rout proposes that there needs to be clearer recognition that vocational learners need to be better prepared than traditional academic learners for the transition to HE. She suggests also that institutions need to map the curriculum to ensure vocational learners are not at a disadvantage and that communication between FE and HE is therefore essential. In common with other reports, access to support services is identified as important as is access to advice and guidance and the provision of peer support for learners who might otherwise feel isolated. This project resulted in a number of solutions all of which have the potential to reduce the number of vocational learners withdrawing from HE.

The Action on Access publication, *Supporting Vocational & Work-based Learner Progression into HE* (Smith, 2010), discusses specific examples of joint activity undertaken by Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Network, highlighting the complementary and collaborative nature of this work being done around the shared aims of the widening participation agenda. The importance of partnerships between institutions providing different routes into HE for learners of all ages and with very different educational experiences comes through clearly in the publication, *Widening Participation: A Rough Guide for Higher Education Providers*:

> They will bring together different HEIs and FE colleges, creating a network that reconnects the sectors for the purposes of progression, at a time of some uncertainty about market pressures stemming from the introduction of variable fees. (Allen and Storan, 2005, p. 11)

It is clear also that when thinking about how to develop collaborative/supportive networks not all students have the same needs, face the same challenges or have the same resources on which to draw.

6.2. Pre-entry interventions to support the transition of disabled students

Several publications in the archive relate to pre-entry interventions that address the additional support needs of specific groups of students including, for example, disabled students. Transition to university can be difficult for some disabled students as outlined in the Action on Access report, *Induction and Disabled Learners* (Elliott, 2009). The focus of the report is on supporting the transition of disabled learners to higher education. Elliott reports that first-year students often report being overwhelmed with information, much of which they fail to remember. As well as dealing with the demands of a new course of study and the first few weeks of university life, they also have to go through the process of ensuring their support is in place. Elliott outlines two main approaches for HEIs to consider: mainstream (directed at all students) or discrete (directed solely at disabled students). Elliott also argues that many of the initiatives aimed at disabled students would benefit all students, whether disabled or not.

The report draws together seven examples of practice in HE designed to offer an improved transition experience for disabled students, providing case studies of interventions directed at disabled students. These include Stepping Stones 2HE (Bournemouth), which is a web-based resource to enhance transition and induction for all students. The interventions aim to encourage early engagement with the course and the wider university by providing information about university study, student support and other aspects of university life normally covered in induction. The report includes positive feedback from students and some evidence of its success:
The programme is fun; enables early group bonding; enthuses students, they are keen to participate and create an end product; makes students feel part of the university before they arrive; is a good introduction to return to study; effective in leaving students feeling positive, determined and enthusiastic and creates a genuine ‘buzz’ around the school. (Elliott, 2009, p. 13)

Case study 2 reports on the Get Ahead early induction event for disabled students at the University of Derby. It is noted that the intervention supports the transition to HE by ensuring that:

- initial experiences of HE are improved;
- necessary support is in place at an earlier stage;
- students feel more confident in the first crucial weeks of university life;
- students know their way around and they understand the role of the support and advisory service;
- all staff involved can offer more support at a less busy period. (Elliott, 2009, p.15)

Elliott argues that without interventions of this type students are likely to take longer to settle into their new life and studies. She also states that if a student then experiences difficulties with any aspect of HE they are more likely to consider leaving without knowledge of where to find the right support services and networks. Evidence given for the success of this intervention includes an average retention rate of 92% for students with support plans in place.

From a policy perspective, HEIs have to increasingly recognise the need to provide induction programmes that offer greater support throughout the first year of study to those groups of students who are generally under-represented in HE and that these are likely to be more effective when recognised as being a part of a wider process that begins at the pre-entry stage. As this comment made by a parent in the Aimhigher 2009 report, Supporting Progression of Disabled Learners to Higher Education, suggests this can be a process that takes time to get right, and it is important that widening participation activity at the pre-entry stage successfully targets and supports these learners as this is key to their future opportunities and success:

Transition is a real issue, if you don’t get it right. It has taken school a while to get to know [learner name] and support is now in place. There were a couple of years where we really struggled to get support. One of the difficulties with Connexions is they don’t really know [learner name], school know him much better and can help us make sound judgements about his future. (Wilson and Elliott, 2009, p.31)

As noted in Elliott (2009) information provided at this point reduces the amount needing to be given during induction where there is a risk that the volume of information given means that it will not be absorbed. It is also noted that ensuring that disabled students are able to access and arrange support at the pre-entry phase reduces the sort of pressures on them during the induction period that increase the risk of early drop-out.

6.3. Familiarisation and preparedness

The following report in the WASRS archive “We thought it [university] was a different world.” A longitudinal study of Aimhigher Northamptonshire learners (Church and Kerrigan, 2011) provides evidence of the sort of work undertaken during the pre-entry phase under Aimhigher to promote HE as a possible future destination and of how this provided young people with no family experience of HE with opportunities to familiarise themselves with HE contexts and the student experience:

The core programme of activities includes campus visits; mentoring; master classes; student ambassadors; information, advice and guidance (IAG), summer schools and HE-related residential experiences. (Church and Kerrigan, 2011, p. 6)

Although designed as a longitudinal study, it was found to be too difficult to collect these type of data, limiting what the study can say about the direct impact of the intervention on transition and retention.
However, the qualitative data included do suggest the potential of the programme to impact on areas associated with retention:

[The activities] try and enlighten you about what university is about so that you don’t feel that you’re making such a leap into the unknown when you come to apply for it. (Church and Kerrigan, 2011, p. 17)

It is important to recognise that pre-entry interventions of this type address overlapping and intersecting areas rather than discrete ones. For example, giving students access to information about what is expected in a course makes it easier for prospective entrants to acquire the skills they will need, thereby building their confidence and resilience for the future. This point is illustrated in a chapter of an e-book in the archive produced by the Lifelong Learning Network, *Mentoring for Progression: bringing the benefits of peer mentoring to non-traditional learners*, (Thomas and Buck, 2011). This discusses two mentoring projects undertaken at the pre-entry stage to support transition, the first involving students enrolled on vocational courses in FE and the second a group of young offenders. Both of these projects were run on the Learning Ladders established Mentoring for Progression model and the approach was found to have been successful in both contexts. The programme was participatory in nature, including interactive workshops and training to undertake peer mentoring. As part of the intervention the young people were encouraged to explore their interests and aspirations and worked in pairs to produce a personal development plan, incorporating their own internet research into course choices and employment opportunities. An important part of the intervention was students’ identification of areas where they felt they needed further support and information in relation to the personal goals they had identified.

Also within the HEA archive is an academic skills module, part of the Flash Pack series, called *Get yourself ready for HE*, produced by Aimhigher (Aimhigher Norfolk, 2010). These modules were developed specifically for use by Aimhigher prospective university entrants and covered the following five areas:

- finance;
- living independently;
- academic study;
- social life;
- health.

The academic skills module “is designed to cover the basics of learning and studying at HE level” (Aimhigher Norfolk, 2011, p. 2) and takes an interactive, self-checking approach to a range of key skills such as time management, note taking and reading techniques and academic referencing. The material demystifies HE through its explanations of terminology, teaching methods and approaches to assessment. It provides a very clear example of the sort of work undertaken to prepare prospective undergraduates to understand the academic expectations of HE.

### 6.4. Pre-entry information and guidance

A one-year, pre-vet bridging programme launched at The Royal Veterinary College is the subject of a report from the archive, *Widening Participation in Academically Challenging Degree Programmes: Helping Vocational Learners Navigate the Admissions Process in Veterinary Medicine* (Davis et al., 2011). It provides an example of a pre-entry intervention that aimed to provide potential applicants from non-traditional background with access to the advice and guidance necessary to successfully navigate the admissions process in a subject area where this group is known to be significantly under-represented. The Gateway Programme specifically targeted students from low income families who might wish to join the veterinary profession but lack the necessary grades. Students fulfilling strict socio-economic criteria were able to apply for what is effectively a six-year Veterinary Medicine degree with three C grades at A-level or distinctions in BTEC in Animal Management. The offer usually given to successful veterinary applicants is three A grades in science subjects at A-level. An online survey of staff involved in the recruitment of prospective students elicited 34
responses and covered demographics, interview training, interview content, BVetMed versus Gateway applicant performance, tips for applicants and other comments. The data from the interview transcripts and online staff survey were combined, analysed and used to form the content of a website that potential applicants could access.

It is not yet clear what contribution this intervention will make to the retention and success of the students successfully targeted – for example whether they would benefit from additional interventions during their course of study or when seeking employment on completion. However, the evidence provided in this report suggests that this pre-entry intervention might have a broader impact as it raised awareness of how to proactively address the needs of this specific group. As an example of a pre-entry initiative conducted in one of the more selective subject areas it is particularly relevant to the fair access agenda.

7. Implications for policy and practice

From an institutional perspective the literature explored in this synthesis suggests that particularly careful thought needs to be given to the pre-entry phase and to the development of relationships with those working with prospective students at an early stage as well as with the students themselves. At what point this process starts and ends emerges as a critical issue as does the identification of the different needs of different student groups and how these can best be met. It is clear, for example, that non-traditional students are more likely to live at home, that this can make it more difficult to build relationships and to integrate – and that this may become more common as fees increase. Ensuring that students are equipped with the understandings and support that they will need to negotiate every stage in their journey through HE is an important protective strategy and the material in the archive clearly suggests the need for interventions that provide supported initiation into critical relationships with peers and staff, while also actively promoting identification with the institution and the experience. Although the student is very clearly central to these concerns this is a collective responsibility, both strategically and operationally, encompassing everyone from leadership level to staff in professional services, lecturers, teachers and widening participation teams.

The factors associated with early withdrawal from HE make it clear that the policy focus on issues of access and aspiration building is insufficient as there is also a need to ensure that prospective students have the skills and knowledge to feel secure and be successful in their chosen course of study. There are a number of examples within the archive of interventions to support first-year undergraduates with the development of core skills as part of a strategy to improve retention. Interventions of this type are an important preventative strategy. As they take active account of the diversity of routes into HE they are likely to be particularly beneficial to non-traditional students. Where these types of interventions are delivered at the pre-entry phase the academic stresses and pressures reported by students in a number of the studies on retention – triggered for instance by the need to resit failed modules – might perhaps be reduced. As these skills are often quite course specific this once again calls for strong cross-phase partnerships.

As an area of ongoing importance in policy terms there are wider policy implications also. In particular, there is an emphasis in the literature on the importance of matching students and courses appropriately to prevent early withdrawal. Investment in impartial careers services and information, advice and guidance is therefore a critical issue and this needs to be widely and readily available in forms that take account of the diversity of the student population. However, prospective students need to be supported in actively using the material that is available and simply providing it is not enough.

Policy makers need also to reflect on how nuanced an understanding of diversity underpins the current agenda to promote social mobility. Many of the reports in the archive make it clear that there has been some success in offering a wider range of students the benefits of HE. Consequently it is important that the current interest in widening access to elite universities and to the professions – important though that is – does not squeeze out consideration of those students for whom issues of progression need to be framed in relation to different but equally important goals and outcomes.
8. Gaps and areas for future research

This synthesis of the literature in the WARSR archive makes it clear that a great deal of work has been undertaken pre-entry and that these interventions have specifically targeted students belonging to those groups most likely to benefit from a focus on retention and success. Although those working at the pre-entry stage do not necessarily make this connection explicit, much of this work has focused on areas closely associated with improved retention. For example, interventions that have provided increased levels of familiarity with the HE context are likely to have eased transition and therefore to have contributed to improved retention and success. However, it is difficult to evidence the direct connections between the work done pre-entry and future outcomes, in part because to track and evidence this presents real practical challenges. It is difficult also to isolate the impact of a specific intervention – or combination of interventions – and to take account of other significant factors. Nevertheless, it seems important to do more to tie these strands of work together – perhaps by undertaking more longitudinal, cross-phase studies. These might also foster the sort of collaboration between different stakeholders that a number of reports in the archive suggest contribute to improved retention and success.

Although retention is a key performance indicator it is actually a matter of social justice to ensure that those brought into HE as part of the widening participation agenda are actively protected from the psychological, financial and/or emotional costs of non-completion in those cases where it is not a positive choice made by the individual concerned. Resources in the WASRS archive clearly highlight the need for nuanced understandings of the diversity of the student population – specific to each institution – and for systems that ensure that the voices of those students at greatest risk of non-completion are heard. The What Works? series of reports evidence the value of research into the quality of the teaching and learning experience, undertaken as part of a process of institutional self-reflection. This is because it supports the development of more informed understandings of the impact of internal processes and practices on specific groups of students. Such research is particularly important in the current economic climate if university leaders and policy makers are to fully understand the impact of fee increases and cuts in levels of student support (academic, social and personal) on the retention and success of students from less advantaged households or with additional needs.

9. References


http://www.hepi.ac.uk/466-1348/The-academic-experience-and-outcomes-of-students-with-vocational-level-3-qualifications.html


