

Improving the retention and success of higher education students at a regional university: towards a more personalised approach

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Abstract

The lower levels of completion of students from regional and remote areas are well documented (Wood et al, 2016). This poster session reports the findings from a study that aimed to identify the factors contributing to the continuing high levels of attrition at regional universities and strategies for addressing these challenges. The project involved interviews with over 800 students who discontinued their studies. The session will present the findings of the study, including factors that students believed contributed to their decision to discontinue their studies, strategies that might have helped those students to complete their studies and to identify students who would consider returning to study. Recommendations about the strategies that can be implemented to improve the retention and completion of students from regional backgrounds are proposed.

Research Design

Following approval from the university's ethics committee, undergraduate students whose enrolments had lapsed between 2010 and 2015 were attempted to be contacted by phone. Over 3,000 contacts were made, from which 800 former students being interviewed addressing five major themes based on Kalsbeek's (2013) retention framework and Wood et al's (2015) extended version of this framework; the personal characteristics relating to student profile; how well prepared students were for higher education; the extent to which students' expectations of the university promises were met; university processes; students' experiences of how well the university monitored and supported their progress.

Findings

The findings identified personal and financial concerns, time management issues, work life balance, lack of preparedness for study and health factors as major determinants of student attrition. Lack of motivation and feelings of disengagement were also contributing factors. Strategies suggested include ensuring students are better prepared and understand the requirements of their chosen profession prior to enrolment, more interaction with students studying at a distance, via phone rather than email, and improved strategies for monitoring student progress and engaging with students who fail to re-enrol. The findings suggest that a phone follow up of students at the time of withdrawing from their studies would have a significant impact on student retention and success.

References

- Kalsbeek, D. H. (2013). Framing Retention for Institutional Improvement: A 4 Ps Framework reframing Retention Strategy for Institutional Improvement, *New Directions for Higher Education*, Spring 2013(161), 5-14.
- Wood, D., Gray-Ganter, G., & Bailey, R. (2016). Pre-commencement interviews to support transition and retention of first year undergraduate students. *Student Success*, 7(2), 21-31.