# Why do so many non-traditional entrants fail to complete their first year successfully?
# Are we failing our students ?

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## Background and rationale

The University of Wolverhampton Business School (UWBS) has been running a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Business for many years. The students who enrol on this award are now students with at least the equivalent of one A level grade E pass, or are mature students. The failure rate for these students in their first year is high (25% do not continue study). The purpose of this research is to identify factors that might cause them to perform badly and to address the following questions:

a)    Are we failing our students?

b)    What can UWBS do to improve the situation?

Much research has been carried out into the performance of non-traditional entrants to higher education (Bowl, 2004; Thomas, 2001; MacDonald and Stratta 2001; Mackie, 2001; Reay, 2003). However, much of this research has tended to concentrate on the non-traditional student being the mature entrant returning to study. UWBS has found that performance of mature students does not on the whole give cause for concern. On the contrary, most of the mature students show great motivation and perform well. The focus for this research, therefore, is on students who are the first in their families to go into higher education (also referred to as 'first generation' students) and students whose academic attainment in school or college prior to entering university was low (also referred to as low achievers).

The majority of research into retention and why students drop-out (NATFHE; 2001, Peelo, 2002; Yorke, 2000; Aldridge and Rowley, 2001) has been conducted in post-1992 institutions, where there is a larger problem of poor retention. These institutions are not only those with the greatest numbers of such students, they are also those with the lowest teaching incomes per student and the highest staff student ratios. NATFHE (2001) stated that there is a clear link between drop-out rates and the numbers of students coming into higher education from non-traditional HE backgrounds. It is against this background that the research at UWBS has been conducted. It is to the small body of research into the causes of withdrawal of first generation and low achiever student groups (Tett, 2000; Rhodes and Nevill, 2004; Thomas, 2002) that this research will contribute.

## The Research

A number of qualitative data collection methods were used to address the research questions. First, a UWBS researcher gathered initial data by interviewing former students who had withdrawn from their courses in their first year. He also held focus groups comprising current first year students to find out what they felt were the key factors influencing non-participation and withdrawal. Although these students were not specifically HND or non-traditional students, some valuable issues were raised. Another form of qualitative data came from interviews with students who had failed their first year, and who were requesting a repeat of the first year. These students were considered to be non-traditional students.

Quantitative research was carried out by analysing drop-out rates of HND students over the past three years. These were the years when the entry requirement was lowered to one A level equivalent. In addition, the attendance records for all year 1 modules provided attendance rates and patterns of attendance for the HND students that could be correlated with drop out statistics. This also provided another type of data to triangulate that gathered from qualitative research.

## Outcomes

The key findings from the qualitative research suggest that the main reasons for student withdrawal in the first year are: academic, financial and personal. However, within these categories a number of other dimensions emerged. These included:

1. Information – students stated that they wanted clear concise information, in particular:
   - Choices of course and module available to them.
   - Assignment criteria and assignment feedback.
   - Whom to turn to when they feel they have academic, personal or financial problems.
2. Customer Care – the main aspects raised here were:
   - The availability of lecturers for consultation and feedback.
   - The lack of engagement with students in lectures.
   - The lack of handouts and support materials for assignments.
   - Good interpersonal skills for staff.
   - The feeling of lack of ownership or control of the student process by the undergraduates themselves.
   - The need for a 'grounding' for students in their first term.
3. Transportation and multi-site provision – these issues were not considered to be as important as the other two, however they were regarded as a problem:
   - Basing of lectures and staff at differing campuses.
   - Inflexibility of free transport.
   - Information about transportation.

Discussion with students requesting a repeat of their first year focused on personal and financial problems with which the student had to cope. More specific areas are detailed below:

1. Lack of commitment - Many students stated that they had come to University because of parental pressure, and were not really sure if it was what they wanted to do. However, they felt that they would be letting their family down if they did not continue. Their lack of motivation meant that they did not attend lectures/ tutorials on a regular basis, and were not committed to study.
2. Lack of awareness of what university was really like – many of the students did not have parents who had been to university, and therefore did not have an awareness of what life was going to be like.
3. Students found the change from school/FE college difficult. They had previously received much more help, and had been managed by their previous institution. They expected more to be done for them.
4. They found the 'freedom' difficult. One student quoted ' this is the first time I have been on my own with no-one telling me what to do, and checking up on me – it just went to my head !!'.
5. Financial problems – many students were working part-time in order to be able to survive, and were finding it difficult to manage the work/study/personal life balance.
6. Students found meeting friends and forming social groups difficult. This was often accentuated by the fact that the students were living at home, and having to travel considerable distance, so were only attending timetabled teaching sessions.

When asked if they had talked to anyone about their concerns, most of them had not. They either did not really know who to talk to, or did not feel they could talk about it.  Many of the students had not talked to their parents about the problems they were having, and some parents were unaware their son or daughter had failed and were looking to repeat a year of study.

Quantitative research showed that attendance had a clear correlation with success, and, on discussion with students, the non-attenders were those who were not sufficiently motivated.

Over the last few years the percentage of students not completing their first year has been falling. After the resit boards, rates for non-completion of first year, were 2001/2 48%, 2002/3 49%, 2003/4 31%.  Comparable figures for 2004/5 are not yet available – 25% have already withdrawn, and there will be additional students who will not be able to proceed after the September resits. Therefore it is likely that the withdrawal rate for this year will be similar or marginally higher than last year.

A survey carried out by Aldridge and Rowley (2001) on students who withdrew from courses at Edge Hill College found similar issues. They found a combination of personal and study difficulties caused students to withdraw.  Personal reasons included domestic difficulties, financial difficulties, travelling difficulties, and employment as the main problems.  Study difficulties were mentioned such as 'course not as expected', but factors such as 'the institution not as expected', 'attitude of teaching staff ', and 'lack of learning support' were also mentioned.

Research by Yorke (1999) identifies five significant factors:

- Incompatibility between the students and the course/institution, lack of preparation for the HE experience.
- Lack of commitment to the course.
- Financial hardship.
- Poor academic progress.

Further research from Mackie (2001), analysed the findings under four main areas:

- Social forces enable/constrain social integration – meeting people, integrating, finding support and establishing a social group.
- Organisational forces enable/constrain organisational integration – understanding and coping with course content, pace and style. Finding the organisation supportive.
- External forces enable/constrain integration within the University – focuses in the environment that aid or impede the ability of the student to cope with the change – financial, accommodation, part-time work, family, relationships.
- Individual forces enable/constrain the individual's commitment to change – the motivation, commitment, feelings and attitudes of the individual involved in the change – long term goal, initial commitment, homesickness, the availability of alternatives.

Mackie concludes that it is a combination of these issues, which determine whether or not a student succeeds or fails, but that the individual force is the most important.

Ozga and Sukhnandan(1998) further support these findings. They conclude that the main factors concerned with non-completion are student preparedness and compatibility of choice. They also confirm that non-completers tend to be those students who have entered HE for reactive reasons (expectations of parents, teachers, or the natural progression after sixth form study) whereas the completers tend to make proactive choices ( the importance of personal interests, ambitions and career opportunities).

The findings from these studies appear to be in line with those identified at UWBS and it would seem that there are two overriding issues that, as an institution, we must address.  First, students are not really clear what university life is about – this is particularly true of those students who do not have peers or members of the family with university experience. This is not just about the courses, where there are large quantities of information available, but about university itself, what life is like, what the difference is between students' previous study and university study. The second main area is the

transition into university life.  There are problems associated with integrating into university life, the change into being a more independent learner, the independence, and the need to have much more useful forms of information available.  In the following section, I describe some of the measures that have been taken so far within UWBS and at university level to address these issues.

# University life

## Awareness raising

Students are not sufficiently aware of what university life is like, and what is expected from them. Some initiatives have already been undertaken within UWBS to improve this.  Work is being carried out with local feeder schools and colleges.  A Business Teachers' Forum is now running successfully to develop links, and a number of schools have brought groups of students to UWBS for taster sessions. These have been very successful. This is an attempt to break down the barriers between schools/FE colleges and the University and raise awareness among prospective students of what university life is like.

## Making friends

The format of 'Welcome Week' was changed for 2002/3. Students were kept in smaller award groups with their award leaders/personal tutors in an attempt to develop social groups, and to make students feel more included. Following student feedback, more improvements are to be made for the new intake in September.

# Transition from school and college

## Adjusting to freedom

Increased monitoring of students in their first year is taking place, with attendance of several first year modules being monitored.  Any persistent non-attender is contacted by a member of UWBS undergraduate administrative support team by phone, e-mail or letter.  Details of non-attendance is also passed to the student's personal tutor.  Personal tutor meetings are scheduled and attendance or non-attendance at these meetings has also been monitored.  These measures have helped some students take attendance seriously and become more responsible learners.  Unfortunately, the students who appear to have problems affecting their study do not generally attend these meetings, and more evaluation is being carried out in this area.

## Information

There has also been development in the area of making information more readily and easily available to students.  Following the initial findings from the focus group interviews, a new form of giving students information was trialled in 2004/5. All new students were given a diary, A5 ring binder diary, containing a week-to-view calendar, and all generic information on how the University works. This included guidelines of who to contact in the event of problems, procedures on extensions, mitigation, and other basic academic regulations.

Some students have been using the diary extensively, but others have not.  Feedback from the students, was, although it was useful it was rather cumbersome to carry. A different format is to be used this year, with some increased guidance information.  More information will be placed on WOLF, with pointers in the diary as to where to obtain this information.

## Foundation degree

In 2004/5, a new award, a Foundation Degree (FD) in Business Management, was launched. This attracted students from a similar background to the HND, although there was slightly higher number of mature students. The performance of these students shows a better retention rate than for HND (16% failure rate as against a 25% failure rate on HND). Attendance rates were also better. A personal development module forms a core module on FD with a much more student centred approach, and has resulted in very good attendance throughout, compared with a similar module on HND.

Overall performance of these students was significantly better than those on HND. 70% of Foundation Degree students passed all their modules in June, whereas the figure for HND was 42.5%. The input qualifications of the two sets of students was very similar, although there is no clear explanation for the improvement in performance.

# Future developments

The effectiveness of all these initiatives must be fully evaluated to see their effects on retention. The effectiveness of the new form of diary is being monitored, and more work is being carried out in making information on WOLF more interactive and user-friendly.

Welcome week has again been modified for this new intake, and the changes will be monitored and measured against previous years' first year retention rate. It would be useful to continue to monitor the performance of HND students against Foundation Degree students, and to evaluate why the motivation and performance of these two sets of students is different.

There is still a real need to improve the awareness of potential students into what university life is like, and more evaluation needs to be carried out in this area, to determine an effective strategy.

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