

Higher Education

Improving Student Retention in Higher Education



The Role of
Teaching and
Learning

Edited by Glenda Crosling, Liz Thomas and Margaret Heagney

Improving Student Retention in Higher Education

Improving Student Retention in Higher Education explores the issue of student retention in higher education and teaching and learning approaches that encourage students to continue with their studies. Underpinned by research indicating that students are more likely to continue if they are engaged in their studies and have developed networks and relationships with their fellow students, *Improving Student Retention in Higher Education* exemplifies best practice of innovative and inclusive teaching and learning approaches, from a range of countries. The book:

- Frames the major aspects of the topic of student retention
- Includes action research-based cases by higher education (HE) teachers globally
- Discusses practical curriculum development strategies that are student responsive, engaging and active
- Features chapters exploring student diversity, alternative teaching and learning approaches and disciplinary study
- Includes reflective reader questions that underpin curriculum development, and thus consider teaching, learning and students

Improving Student Retention in Higher Education appeals to academics, student affairs administrators, policy makers, researchers and support staff in Higher Education.

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Preface

Introduction

This book focuses on the significant issue in contemporary higher education of the retention of students in their studies. In the context of student diversity, the book considers teaching and learning approaches that encourage and assist students to engage with their institution and their studies, therefore increasing the likelihood of their academic success and continuation. The aim of discussing such approaches in this book is to encourage our readers to reflect on their teaching and their students' learning, and to shape their teaching in ways that are student-responsive. While there are many factors in contemporary higher education that impact on students' retention, the book makes a valuable contribution to the field in that it focuses on one facet that is within the control of educators – the teaching and learning programme. Thus, we explore in detail ways that the programme can be developed to assist students' engagement and to enrich their learning.

The book discusses the issues surrounding student retention from a scholarly perspective, and also presents a range of practical approaches and strategies, which may also be used as models for future action by teachers in higher education. The lively and engaging cases set in authentic situations provide insight into the ways that higher education staff from across the globe have responded positively and creatively to the challenges posed by the diversity of the student population and the current competitive pressures in higher education. The cases are contextualised by the inclusion in the book of three research-based chapters by the book's authors on the themes of student diversity, alternative modes of teaching and learning, and the disciplines of study. These chapters explore the current thinking in the field on these topics, and pave the way for the cases that follow and elaborate on aspects of the themes.

We have designed the book so that it is suitable for a range of audiences concerned with the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, and the overall student experience. The scholarly content, practical examples and encouragement to reflect on one's own practice are relevant to:

- educational and academic development staff for use in developing ways that teaching and learning and the curriculum can be more responsive to students;

- lecturers and tutors and new teaching staff (including those seeking accreditation) about their teaching and their diverse student profiles; learning and teaching advisors and developers who develop quality educational programs for their faculties and departments;
- equity and widening participation practitioners and retention officers, and staff in higher education concerned with equity and access issues;
- subject specialists, who are concerned to improve retention rates within their disciplinary contexts;
- staff teaching postgraduate courses and supervising research; policy makers in higher education.

The book's content

The introductory chapter sets out the book's main themes, and identifies the background issues linking learning and teaching to the retention of students. By focusing on the formal learning experience, we explore the ways in which student success can be improved through 'curriculum development'. We use the term curriculum broadly to refer to learning, teaching and assessment approaches, as well as course contents. The underpinning tenet of our book is that the learning and teaching context – or curriculum – should be responsive to students; thus we promote a student-centred approach that uses active learning strategies and engages students academically and socially in the learning process.

The book is structured along the three major themes identified previously; these relate to learning and teaching and reflect aspects of contemporary higher education. These sections begin with chapters and are followed by exemplary cases and their discussion:

- 1 Student diversity: recognises the substantial changes in higher education including reduced governmental funding, global competition for students and increased participation in higher education that has resulted in a diverse student profile;
- 2 Modes of teaching and learning: emphasises a more holistic, student-rather than teacher-centred approach to teaching and learning and the importance of alternative and innovative learning and teaching approaches to promote student engagement, retention and success;
- 3 Disciplines of study: recognises the disciplines' particular characteristics and cultures, ways of approaching knowledge, teaching and learning preferences, and emphasises the importance of building students' needs into traditional teaching and learning approaches.

The 15 action research-based cases included in the book are accessible, practical and insightful, and reflect the situations of higher education teachers in countries such as Australia, Indonesia, South Africa, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Malaysia. The student-responsive teaching and learning

developments discussed in the cases have been implemented to engage students. The cases are structured in an accessible form that, first, sketches the background and the issue(s) that led to the teaching and learning development. The next section explains the actions undertaken in the form of curriculum development, and rationale, while the final section evaluates strengths and weaknesses and future implications.

The conclusion draws together the learning and teaching approaches to engage students in their studies that are presented through the case examples in the book. The cases are discussed in relation to the retention strategies of student-responsive curriculum, academic and social engagement, and active learning that are focused on in this book. Arising from the cases, ways to implement these strategies are identified as the cases are discussed. Finally, we present some questions for our readers' reflection on their teaching and their students' learning.

The book's distinctive features

The teaching and learning context in higher education has changed dramatically in recent times. The importance of students' engagement with their institution and with their studies is made clear in the literature, but the fact is that, compared with previous times, many students no longer engage more broadly with their institution through, for example, support services and extra-curricular activities. The most distinctive feature of the book is that it suggests strategies to encourage and assist this vital aspect of learning that is within the control of academic staff; that is, it explores approaches that are embedded in the teaching and learning program and therefore reach a majority of students.

The book is comprehensive. It includes scholarly content by the book's authors that teases out and contextualises the issue of student retention to larger and global movements in higher education. This includes the importance of students' academic and social engagement, and, indeed, the enrichment of the educational process that follows when student diversity is addressed in educational programs. The cases are self-reflective, fresh and exciting in that they are real-life examples of teachers' responses to changing student circumstances and diversity, and shared generously with readers. As well as 'normalising' the dynamic teaching and learning environment and its inherent tensions, the cases operate as models and suggestions for responses to challenging situations, and, most importantly, encourage positive responses. The final chapter also analyses the cases in detail along the lines of the framework for student retention identified earlier in the book. From the analysis emerges valuable guidance and direction for staff in the context of the student diversity and the dynamic higher education environment.

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over the time in which the book was conceived and developed, and in particular, we thank Sarah Burrows, Kirsty Smy and Helen Pritt. In the early stages of the book, the reviewers provided comments which we incorporated in the book, and we are most grateful to Kate Exley and Vincent Tinto for their advice and support for the book. We appreciated the support of our colleagues at our respective institutions as we undertook the authoring and editing tasks: at Monash University in Australia and the Higher Education Academy in the UK. Finally, we thank our families for their continuous love, support and encouragement. In particular, Liz thanks Rob and Lucy Jones.

Glenda Crosling
Liz Thomas
Margaret Heagney
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Foreword

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An old-fashioned and often critiqued way of looking at education is to consider it in terms of content and process. Criticism of this simple notion has come from many directions, including the importance of ‘the medium’ or process actually comprising ‘the message’ or content. In *Improving Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Teaching and Learning* content and process go hand-in-hand: each contributes to the other and both are compelling.

The ‘content’ of the book is structured around the themes of student diversity, modes of teaching and learning, and disciplines of study. These constitute major areas that affect the modern higher education challenge of educating a new, mass and different student population, using new methods and technologies which are appropriate for differing disciplinary contexts. Some of the topics addressed in the content include: retention, success, academic and social engagement, student diversity, internationalisation, curriculum development, and assessment. These provide the reader with a sound framework to understand the impact on student retention of innovative teaching practice.

The ‘process’ of the book is based on involving the reader in real-life case studies. It follows from the approach taken by Peter Schwartz and myself in *Case Studies on Teaching in Higher Education* in 1993 which led to a later series of six case study books between 2001 and 2003. The case study approach has proven remarkably adjustable and resilient to different ‘content’ areas and has continued to stimulate interest and provoke readers irrespective of their location around the world; their experience in higher education and their discipline area. *Improving Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Teaching and Learning* does what good education always should do – it brings together important and interesting topics of content with an interesting and stimulating approach to engage the learner/reader in the process of education. As education is an essentially social activity for the social good, I hope that *Improving Student Retention in Higher Education: The Role of Teaching and Learning* stimulates you to new and interesting conversations with your students and colleagues, families and friends.

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Introduction

Student success and retention

*Glenda Crosling, Liz Thomas
and Margaret Heagney*

Introducing retention and success

In recent times, a significant concern in higher education (HE) is the retention of students in their studies. Institutions worldwide are under pressure to reduce the rates of students 'dropping out', and develop new and innovative means that encourage students to continue (Thomas and Quinn 2003). For instance, in all parts of the UK, institutions' progression and completion rates are measured via two performance indicators by the Higher Education Funding Council, and institutions are penalized financially for low rates of student retention. Similarly, in Australia, student retention is one of seven institutional indicators of quality teaching and learning utilized by the federal government for the allocation of teaching and learning performance funding. It is also one of four indicators used to assess institutions' equity performance, to which special funding for the institution's equity activities is tied.

This pressure for retention emanates from the recent, momentous changes in higher education worldwide which have resulted in the movement from an elite system of HE educating a small and limited number of the society, to a 'massified' (Trow 1973) one where large numbers of students attend higher education. This has been accompanied by an expansion in the number of students from previously under-represented groups who now attend higher education. These changes have impacted on the HE system in interrelated ways (Radford 1997). A major impact is the dramatic transformation of the composition of the student body because of economic imperatives for a more skilled workforce in the competitive global world. At the same time, governments are now concerned with the quality of the education provided in HE and have put in place quality assurance measures. The increasingly competitive HE global market also means that the institution's reputation is reflected in the quality of the graduates. In this setting, student drop out from study has become an issue of concern because of the implications for the quality of the programme and the graduates, including the degree that programs can cater for students from diverse groups (Crosling & Webb 2002).

The now diverse student population includes students from different ethnic groups and non-English-speaking backgrounds, international, lower socio-economic backgrounds, mature aged students, students with disabilities, as well as

those for whom higher education is the first family experience. Higher education can be an alienating experience for such students in that their backgrounds, previous educational experiences and needs may result in gaps, or even chasms, between the students' educational expectations, and those of their institutions and teachers. While discontinuation rates for students from diverse backgrounds can be high, it cannot be assumed that discontinuation occurs because of the students' lack of ability or motivation. For instance, Given and Smailes (2005: 4), in their study at the Northumbria University in the UK, found that students who were of mature age and the first of their family to attend higher education had the 'academic abilities and motivations that are required to study successfully at HE level'.

Defining retention and rates of retention

There are differing definitions of retention and rates of retention across countries. For instance, in the USA, *retention* refers to the proportion of students who enroll and remain at a particular institution, while *persistence* rates refer to the proportion of students enrolled at one institution who transfer and remain enrolled in another college. USA studies show that 51 per cent of students who begin university study in the United States complete their degree within six years within their first institution, and another 8–12 per cent will eventually earn their university degrees via transfer to another institution (Tinto 2002:1). Similarly in Australia, it has been estimated that approximately 20 per cent of students do not complete their courses. However, a new study of students who began a Bachelor's Degree at Australian universities in first semester 2004 counted students who transferred to other institutions not as drop-outs, but as retained in the system. It suggested that the actual drop-out figure could be close to 10 per cent, depending on the proportion of students who follow through their intention to re-enroll later (Long, Ferrier & Heagney 2006). In Sweden five years' study is seen as completion, rather than a focus on graduation.

Students who change universities, or drop out temporarily, are not included in UK studies. It is estimated that one student in six leaves without completing (House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment 6th Report, in Thomas *et al.* 2003: 87). Retention of students in higher education is estimated to be 20 per cent in the Netherlands, 26 per cent in Sweden, while in Canada 25 per cent of full-time students and 59 per cent of part-timers do not complete their courses (Thomas & Quinn: 2003).

Variation in completion times impacts on the determination of retention rates. Although completion legitimately takes a long time (McInnis *et al.* 2000: 6), there is far less flexibility in the determination of completion in England and Wales, where students who do not complete their studies in four years are classified as 'non completers'. In Germany, the standard university degree course is nine semesters long, but most students take more than twelve semesters to complete a degree (Schnitzer & Heublein 2003: 2). While there is this cross-country variation,