

Retention, Success and Progression amongst Foundation Year Students: the effects of the transition to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic– A Case Study

Towella Ngambi, Joanne Brown, Fosca Grossi, Shamsun Choudhury, Peter Baylis, Stefan Overton

8th July 2020

Abstract

In a matter of weeks, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed all aspects of teaching and learning worldwide. With the uncertainty of this unprecedented time, schools and universities in the UK have had to suspend face-to-face teaching and switch to online teaching in March. The pandemic and lockdown have forced students and teachers to explore new ways of teaching and learning and equip themselves for the challenges ahead. Although, Arden university (RDI) is one of the first founded organisations to deliver education online prior to covid-19, the closure of campus and the disconnect of face-to-face interaction between staff and student has not only disrupted the ways of traditional classroom-based learning; the closure also coincides with the assessment process which has had significant adverse impact on the submission of assignments and overall retention. Arden provide classroom as well as online teaching through its Blended Learning Provision.

The paper will review the staff experiences of using various digital platforms such as Adobe Connect to deliver sessions and its effectiveness and discuss the impact (both positive and negative) this has had on the assessment and progression of students.

Keywords: online education, distance learning, virtual teaching, foundation year, COVID-19, retention, pandemic, Bourdieu's Habitus, Sociology, assessment

Introduction

The new reality is that COVID-19 Pandemic has dominated not just our collective head spaces but, also what our jobs look like today. That's especially the case for higher education lecturers/ teachers, including those staff responsible for helping to support students, deliver instruction and learning in educational institutions. The increase in the incidence rate of Covid19 in the UK population and worldwide, eventually led to governments imposing a lockdown on their residents.

For the fact that Covid19 is mainly transmitted from person to person via respiratory droplets in form of sneezing, coughing or speaking (GOV.UK 2020), all no-essential businesses, including higher education institutions, had been advised to close down and move all instructions to virtual settings because of health concerns related to COVID-19. The Pandemic has hence ushered-in a transition to the use of technology and technological

devices and platforms to substitute face-to-face classroom learning in order to avert the spread of the virus.

As noble as this action may be, this may have some consequences; for the staff and students, especially for foundation year students. Many students may not be competent in the use of the available mobile and online digital platform for teaching & learning; hence, they may require specialised instructors who understands their different learning characteristics to support and help them learn best in HEIs (Huang 2002: Huey Zher and Baharom 2018). With all resources being online, this may lead to a high failure rate and/or, a low retention rate in the HEIs, among other psychological and physical impacts (Park & Choi 2009). Hence the need for a concerted effort in the form of; trying to understand the foundation year students and their difficulties, flexibility, robust staff training to understand and use available digital support and teaching systems more effectively, etc., in order to bring about foundation year students' retention and progression.

Literature Review

Student retention and success has become even more crucial for Universities since the establishment of the Office for Students, the dawn of marketization, and the newly published Augar report (2019). The National Audit Office concluded in their 2007 analysis that Universities needed to improve retention rates. 'Retention is about students remaining in one HE institution and completing a programme of study. 'Success' recognises that students benefit from HE study in a wide range of ways, including personal development and progression into work and career or further learning', (Advance HE, 2019). As a result of the Augar report (2019) and other government policies around funding, retention and success will be key areas of work for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for the next few years. This will be even more important for those who deal with a high number of Widening Participation Groups which include Foundation Year students. There are financial implications if students withdraw and there are also implications for the reputation of a University. Simpson (2006) carried out an assessment of the cost benefits of increased student retention and came to the conclusion that increased retention rates save institutions money in the long run.

Students who fall within widening participation groups: This group of students which includes Foundation Year students comprises students from lower social economic backgrounds, ethnic minority groups, vocational and work-based learners, those leaving care and mature students (Moore, et al., 2013). This group has increased since universities were encouraged to take on more diverse students after being driven by factors such as the Robbins report (1963), the New Labour government 1997 reforms which set a target participation rate for universities to be achieved by 2010 and also the Milburn report (2012) which recommended that universities looked at their entry requirements to ensure that they were not excluding those from lower social economic backgrounds.

Foundation year (also referred to as Year 0) is usually an additional year of study and this takes place at the beginning of a University Degree Course. The Foundation year allows students who are unable to meet normal entry requirements to build up their skills and fill in any gaps before they go on to their full degree programme. On the other hand, Foundation degrees can be distinguished from Foundation Year because they are mostly vocational qualifications focused on students who are working within a sector in which they want to achieve a qualification. They take the first two years of their degree within a Further Education college and then complete their degree at University by taking two more years. A Foundation Year is therefore different to the Foundation Degree (Prospects, 2020).

The Office for Students (2019), highlighted the following statistics in relation to Foundation Year students:

- 47 per cent of those who are on foundation year are female. 56 per cent of UK entrants to degree courses generally are female.
- A high number of mature students on Foundation Year Courses are more likely to come from areas of high deprivation according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) for England.
- A higher number of Foundation Year students ((70%) progress to degree programmes overall and this is more than those on Access Courses
- 63 per cent of those who started their Higher Education journey with a Foundation Year qualified within four years, compared to 53 percent of students on Access Courses

Retention and success are a key element of widening participation delivery and practice. Many of the policies and practices towards retention and success take place over the course of the student's journey. There are interventions at pre-entry, during the transition into HE stage and these include 'bridging courses'. These interventions are there in order to assist the students to feel more comfortable with lecturers, fellow students and to understand how HE works (Jackson & Cameron, 2012). Foundation year serves as a bridging course and as such it contributes to the success and retention of students when they get into the higher years. Retention and success activities take place during the induction phase, in the teaching phase and also during the exit phase.

A number of studies have been undertaken as a result of the government drive to boost retention and success in HE (Andrews & Clark, 2012; Avery, et al., 2019; Webb, et al., 2017; HEFCE, 2017) as a result of the government drive relating to the retention and success of students. Most of the research in the UK so far covers withdrawal and retention rates, the underlying causes of withdrawal and success, success strategies, and how early withdrawal impacts on student withdrawal. This study will focus on retention with regards to withdrawals, progression and success during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Withdrawal and retention rates: OECD data highlights the high rate of student retention in the UK, in comparison to other developed countries. The National Audit Office (2007) concluded in an analysis of HESA statistical data that withdrawal rates differ between subjects, institutions and groups. They found that Medical and Dentistry students have the highest retention rates and that joint courses have the lowest. They also found that post 1992 Universities and those with a high number of Widening Participation students showed lower retention figures. Their analysis also went on to suggest that the characteristic profile of the students, including their level of qualification at pre-entry can affect retention. They especially highlighted that full-time students were more likely to complete their studies as were students who had 2 or more A levels. Part-time students with less qualifications were found to have more success at College rather than at a Higher Education Institution.

The UK has a dual policy on widening participation and also retaining students. This has highlighted social issues and class as being a causal factor in early withdrawal. An Analysis by Smith and Naylor (2001) showed that the lack of course completion was more prevalent amongst students from low economic social classes. Another study by Forsyth and Furlong (2003) and the Milburn Report (2012) corroborated these findings concluding that the poorest students in Scotland were most at risk of early withdrawal.

In 2008, a survey by Yorke and Longen found seven factors which contribute to withdrawals and these include:

- A high academic workload
- Poor learning experiences
- Student dissatisfaction with university resources
- Student not being able to integrate socially
- Wrong course choice
- Students unhappy with the environment and location
- Issues with employment and financial constraints

An explanation of why retention is an issue with Foundation Year students might lie within Tinto's interactionist theory of non-completion. Tinto (1993) who focuses mostly on institutional factors veers away from taking on a psychological perspective on early withdrawals. Tinto (1998) argues that withdrawals are more of a reflection of what is going on in the institution immediately after entry. This means that students who enrol on programmes during the pandemic might be at risk of withdrawal if institutions are not organised or prepared. It also suggests that the on-boarding processes should be a key focus on any policy attempting to enhance student retention.

The key idea within Tinto's model is that of intellectual and social integration into both the academic and social areas of university. Tinto explains that the integration into university life can also depend on a long transition period which forces the individual to separate from past associations and to incorporate new associations into university life and study. He explains that this can involve three stages i.e. separation, transition and incorporation.

Tinto (1998) explains that the contingencies faced by students during University years are part of the process of moving from one community such as FE College to another (University). However he explains that these contingencies can be hard for those students who have cultural/social backgrounds which are different to the orientation or set up of the university. He therefore explains that this mismatch encourages the students to withdraw from the university. He goes on to suggest that non-completion arises when students become isolated and are unable to interact with staff or peers. Studying online can be isolating and so bears consideration during the COVID-19 pandemic online learning transition.

Bourdieu's theories of habitus also explain why some people succeed in terms of participation and achievement within higher education and others do not. Bourdieu (1984) focused on marginalised social groups in Higher Education (HE) in order to demonstrate how education causes inequality and lack of access to continue. The theories are also referred to as thinking tools on why there is a lack of engagement from working class individuals within HE. Habitus causes us to understand that each individual excludes themselves due to a certain 'sense of one's place' (Bourdieu, 1984). It has been, however, found that habitus can change in order to incorporate new practices. Once this change has taken place, habitus is socially reproduced (Burnell, 2015). Bourdieu also claimed that each class in society has its own habitus which is different and that this determines practices, beliefs and even values. This then limits what individuals think and do because of the limits they place on themselves in terms of what is possible (Bourdieu, 1988). Nash (1990) argued that we are not so much conscious of these limits and therefore we are unable to change them as it may happen in resocialisation. Bourdieu's point was that some people succeed in education and some don't due to the class they have been born into. Reay et al. (2009) offer a different perspective and discuss a habitus which is permeable and responsive to the environment (or what is going on around an individual). It explains that even though habitus is internalised, it can change and is modified as an individual experiences the outside world. Therefore if circumstances change for an individual, then their habitus also changes. This means then that as HE institutions we could work at modifying an individual's experiences and this could in turn have an impact on a student's success especially if they are coming from a background where their habitus has caused them to think that University or education is not 'their place'.

The literature suggests therefore that institutions are the key drivers in ensuring that students remain engaged within their studies during the COVID-19 Pandemic and during the transition from face to face to online study. By examining the experiences of lecturers during the transition period, it allows us to gather the much needed knowledge required in order for us to be able to provide a better support system which could impact more positively upon retention figures.

Methodology

Methodological considerations were made in relation to the aims and objectives of this project. The aims and objectives were central to identifying the most suitable methods of data collection and would also contribute to the selection of data analysis. "Research is a process to get deeper insight into any concept, issue or process" (Awasthy & Gupta, 2015). The given study was interested in exploring issues behind retention and transition to online learning during the Covid 19 Pandemic, utilising staff experience and perceptions of this situation. The key aim of the study was to explore student retention on Foundation Year during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The objective was to identify staff perceptions & experiences of the key barriers for students in relation to transitioning onto the Digital Platforms during Covid – 19 and how this had impacted on retention.

The purpose of the research was drawn from the phenomenological perspective and this required the implementation of the epistemology of interpretivism and constructivism (Awasthy & Gupta, 2015). The research aim was to identify staff interpretations of student retention during the Pandemic and their understanding of the key barriers surrounding learning during this time. Therefore it was necessary to investigate staff experiences and reconstruct this to examine the issues that students faced in transitioning to online learning.

Due to the research aim and objective, it was decided to carry out a case study using qualitative methodology to enable the interpretations of student barriers to transitioning to online learning from a range of teaching staff within the Foundation Year programme at a University in the UK.

Qualitative methods of data collection included the use of open-ended questions, which can be carried out in the form of an interview or questionnaire. In support of the use of interviews "Many interview studies are used to elicit respondents' perceptions" (Silverman, 2010). It was felt it was beneficial to use interviews as a method of data collection in the early stage of this project. Due to the use of qualitative analysis, it was important to consider how to guide discussion with the participants without prompting responses from preconceived ideas. Ethical considerations were made including those around being insider researchers and the storage of data.

The semi- structured interviews were carried out using Skype for Business . Questions were loosely structured around Yorke and Longen's (2008) seven withdrawal factors. Lecturers were asked to what extent they felt the following contributed to student withdrawals during the pandemic:

- A high academic workload
- Poor learning experiences
- Student dissatisfaction with university resources
- Student not being able to integrate socially
- Wrong course choice
- Students unhappy with the environment and location
- Issues with employment and financial constraints

They were also asked to discuss their experiences of transitioning onto adobe connect and which tools they found encouraged interaction with the students. There were 6 skype interviews carried out and email qualitative commentary sought from colleagues. We received 10 emails back out of 25 with commentary on their experiences during the pandemic with particular emphasis on why they felt progression was impacted and why there was a high number of withdrawals during this period from Foundation Year students. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted on the data by feeding the text and audio responses into Nvivo.

Findings

- Most lecturer's highlighted that the students' lack of preparation for university study made them more likely to drop out of courses overall.
- Although students seemed to have the relevant IT skills, this was limited to using word and that when required to transition into using Adobe Connect a lot of students lacked the confidence use it and therefore failed to take part in the online sessions.
- IT issues and the lack of IT support in their homes made it especially more difficult for students to feel confident about attending online
- The lack of IT equipment was highlighted with lecturers reporting that some of their students were studying on the phone making it more difficult for them to use tools such as the quizzes and the pods. This meant that social integration was a lot more difficult and this impacted on retention.
- Lecturers also highlighted that using discussion forums worked well for socialisation in some cases and that the transition exposed students to a new set of digital skills
- Submissions were affected during this period as students reported to lecturers that they had a high workload due to home-schooling duties this meant that they did not feel they had a full 'learning experience'.

Conclusion/ Discussion

The topic of retention and success covers the whole student journey and there are multiple causal factors which need to be considered. The literature review identified that internal factors were also important in issues which pertain to retention, progression and success. This study found that most lecturers agreed that 'preparedness' especially in the use of digital tools was a key factor in the withdrawals and progression during the transition onto online delivery. This was especially surprising considering that Arden University already deliver via a Blended Learning model. This therefore highlights that when students are prepared or on-boarded for Blended Courses, they also need to take part in inductions on the use of online learning platforms such as Adobe, Skype or Microsoft Teams.

It should be taken for granted that students have the skills needed. Bath University for example found that during the transition period the 'digital' divide became even more apparent and that this impacted on the most disadvantaged students. This study also found that the lack of IT equipment was something that impacted on the student's progression. In the UK although IT devices seem ubiquitous, 1.9 million households still have no access to the internet and mostly rely on pay-as-you-go services. There are also a high number of students without regular access to a laptop (Ross, 2020). In the future perhaps universities could consider a loan scheme or vouchers for internet access and this can be funded

through working with charities or other organisations who work towards bridging the digital divide in the UK.

Ensuring that retention, progression and success are achieved by Foundation Year students is complex and the solution lies in using a number of interventions and in recognising that one size does not fit all (Webb, et al., 2017). This needs to be considered as we prepare for the future and as we deal with the current COVID-19 pandemic.

References:

Action on Access, 2002. *Student Success in Higher Education*, Bradford: Action on Access.

Advance HE, 2019. *Advance HE*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/teaching-and-learning/student-retention-and-success>

[Accessed 9 January 2020].

Andrews, J. & Clark, R., 2012. *Peer Mentoring Works! How Peer Mentoring Enhances Student Success in Higher Education*, Birmingham: Aston University, Birmingham: Aston University.

Augar, P., 2019. *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding*, London: Crown Publishes.

Avery, R., Lees, R. & Russell, D., 2019. *Commuter student- are you local?*. Newport, Higher Education Annual Conference 2019.

Awasthy, R. & Gupta, R., 2015. *Qualitative Research in Management : Methods and Experiences*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Bourdieu, P., 1988. *Homo Academicus*. Translated by Peter Collier. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Burnell, I., 2015. Widening the Participation into Higher Education: Examining Bourdieusian Theory in Relation to HE in the UK. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 21(2), pp. 93-109.

Forsyth, A. & Furlong, A., 2003. *Losing out? Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Experience in Further and Higher Education*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

GOV.UK, 2020. *Coronaviruses (Covid19)- what you need to know*. Available at:

<https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/01/23/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-what-you-need-to-know/> (Accessed 07 July 20)

Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2017 . *Year one outcomes for first degree students*, Bristol: HEFCE.

Huey Zher Ng and Baharom, S. S. (2018) 'An Analysis on Adult Learners' Satisfaction in Online Education Programmes', *International Journal of Interactive Mobile Technologies*, 12(7), pp. 70–85. doi: 10.3991/ijim.v12i7.9665.

- Jackson, S. & Cameron, C., 2012. Leaving care: Looking ahead and aiming higher. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(6), pp. 1107-1114.
- Liu, Y., Li, H. & Carlsson, C., 2009. *Exploring the factors driving M-learning adoption AIS*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the AMCIS 2009, San Francisco. from <http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2009/178>
- Milburn, A., 2012. *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility - A progress report by the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty*, London: Crown.
- Moore, J., Sander, J. & Higham, L., 2013. *Literature review of research into*, s.l.: HEFCE.
- NAO (National Audit Office), 2007 . *Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education*, London: The Stationary Office.
- Nash, R., 1990. Bourdieu on Education and Social and Cultural Reproduction. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(4), pp. 431-447.
- Office for Students, 2019. *Preparing for degree study: Analysis of Access to Higher Education Diplomas and integrated foundation year courses* ., London: OFS.
- Park, J., & Choi, H. J. (2009). Factors influencing adult learners' decision to drop out or persist in online learning. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society*, 12(4), 207–217.
- Prospects, 2020. *Prospects Careers*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/applying-for-university/choosing-a-course/why-you-should-consider-a-foundation-year>
[Accessed 15 May 2020].
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. & Clayton, J., 2009. Strangers in Paradise'?: Working-class students in Elite Universities. *Sociology*, 43(5), pp. 1103-1121.
- Robbins, L., 1963. *Higher Education, report*, London: Cmnd.
- Ross, A., 2020. *www.bath.ac.uk*. [Online]
Available at: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/campaigns/digital-divide-project/>
[Accessed 8 July 2020].
- Silverman, D., 2010. *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Simpson, O., 2006 . Rescuing the personal tutor: Lessons in costs and benefits . In: L. Thomas & P. Hixenbaugh, eds. *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education* . Trentham Books : Stoke-on-Trent.
- Smith, J. & Naylor, R., 2001. Dropping out of university: a statistical analysis of the probability of withdrawal for UK university students. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 164(2), pp. 389-405.
- Tinto, V., 1993. *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*.. Chicago: Chicago Press.

Tinto, V., 1998. Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously'.
The review of higher education, 21(2), pp. 167 - 177.

Webb, O., Wyness, L. & Cotton, D., 2017. *Enhancing access, retention, attainment and progression in higher education -A review of the literature showing demonstrable impact*, York: Higher Education Academy.

Yorke, M. & Longden, B., 2008. *The First Year Experience of Higher Education in the UK*, York: Higher Education Academy.