Retention Strategies – Do They Really Work?

The role of institutional research and student evaluation

Foundation Year Network Annual Conference July 2008

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Overview

- What do we mean by retention? How do we measure it?
- Benchmarks?
- MMU Foundation Year – examples of strategies and what we have learnt from institutional research and student evaluation
- What do you do? Why do you do it? How can/do you measure its effectiveness?

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What do we mean by retention?

- NAO measures this in two ways:
  - continuation
  - completion
- Internally we tend to limit our analyses to the FY itself:
  - proportion of enrolled intake successfully completing FY
  - proportion who drop out during the year
  - proportion who continue into their first year
- Should also be tracking students' progression through their linked degree

What are we aiming for?

- No benchmarks for level zero Foundation Year retention
- FYs tend to recruit a higher proportion of students from backgrounds not traditionally represented at university than level 1 programmes
  - Level 1 benchmarks therefore not appropriate

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What are we aiming for?

- Many different types of Level 0 FYs
  - Successful retention strategies likely to differ depending upon the nature of provision and cohort

- **Conclusion** – very difficult to measure the relative success of any individual programme

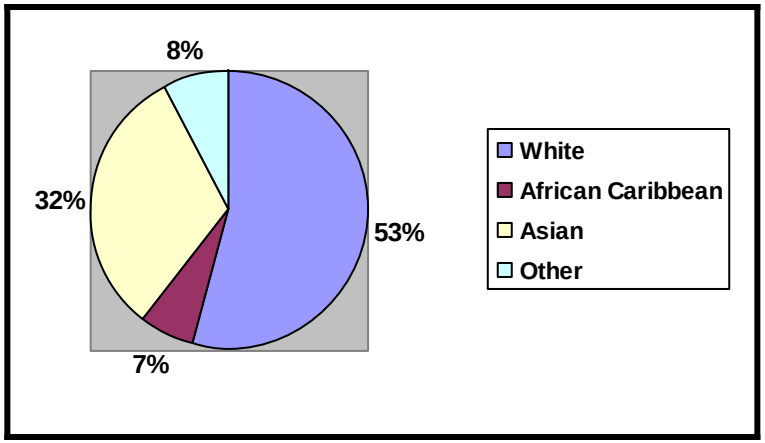
Retention Research Project

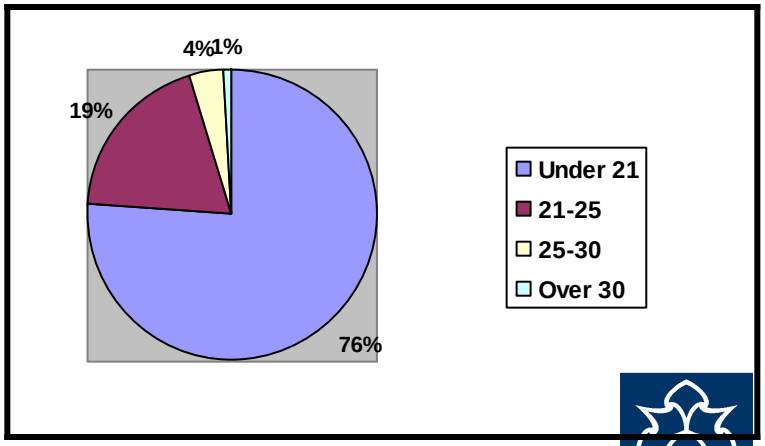
- Aims
  - Develop performance indicators with appropriate benchmarks for retention of level 0 FY students on different types of FY programmes
  - Identify and disseminate good evidence-based practice regarding retention and progression strategies for different cohorts of FY students
- Partners
  - Anna Barney, University of Southampton
  - Nikki Hughes – MMU
  - Peter Lassey – University of Bradford

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MMU Foundation Year Vital Statistics 2007-2008

- Links to 140 degrees
- Delivered at 4 centres (MMU, MMU Cheshire, MANCAT and Trafford)
- Grown from 240 students in 2000 to 841 in 2007/08
- 56% cohort male





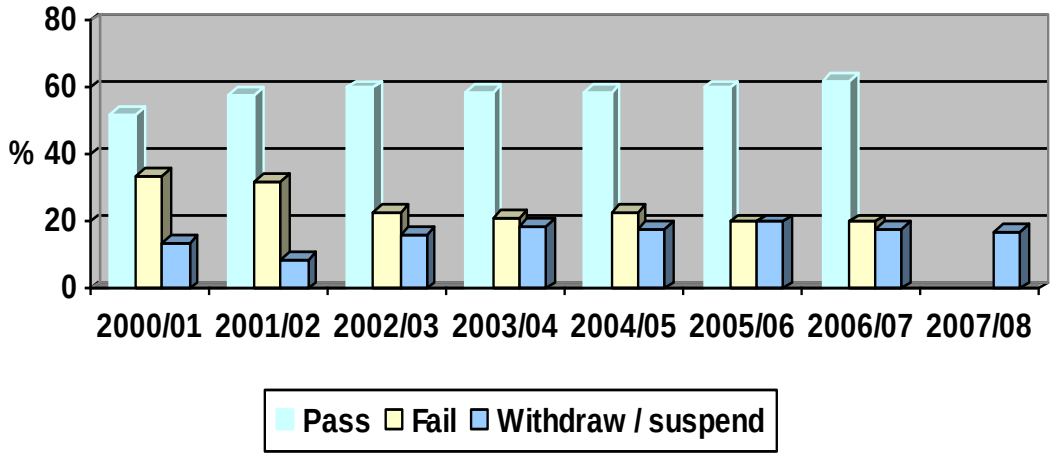
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MMU FY Student Success Strategy

- Activities and interventions focused on supporting students at each stage of the student life cycle
  - raising aspirations
  - pre-entry guidance
  - early experience of HE and the Foundation Year
  - ensuring student success. Fundamental to our approach is an ethos of providing
- Aim to provide positive, non-judgmental and holistic support on an individual basis supported by structured programme-wide interventions throughout the year.
- Some of these interventions are aimed at the whole cohort, others at specific groups identified as at risk of non-completion.

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Cohort Retention



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Not all subject areas are equal

Subject Area	n	Pass	Fail	WD
Average	801	62%	20%	18%
Biological Sciences	43	56%	26%	18%
Chemistry / Dental Tech	36	72%	11%	17%
Accounting & Finance	63	76%	16%	8%
Business	61	48%	23%	30%

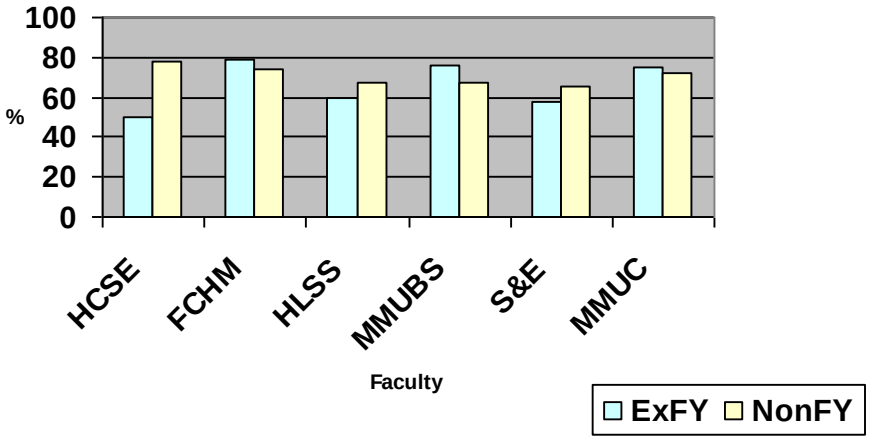
Action taken / planned

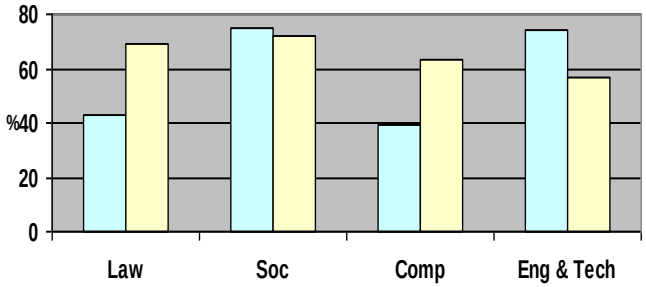
- Introduction of new portfolio-based pre-requisite unit for Business – Introduction to Business (September 2007)
- New, enthusiastic Business FY Tutor, increased engagement with cohort (September 2007)
- Review and modify Biology curricula and delivery (for September 2008)

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Progression Tracking

Progression of Former FY Students (2002/03 cohort) from Year 1 to Year 2 by Faculty and Department





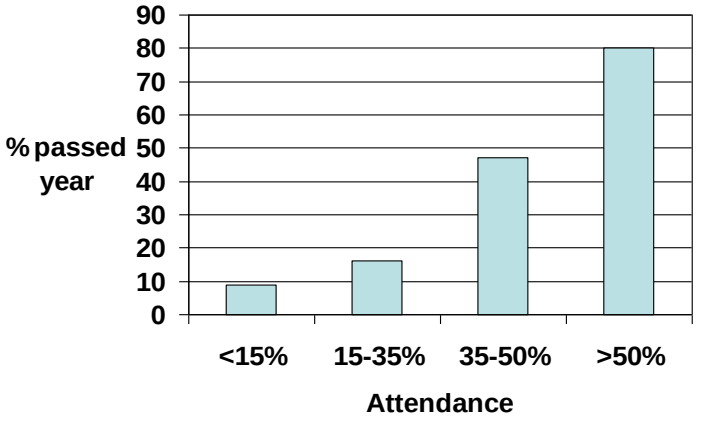
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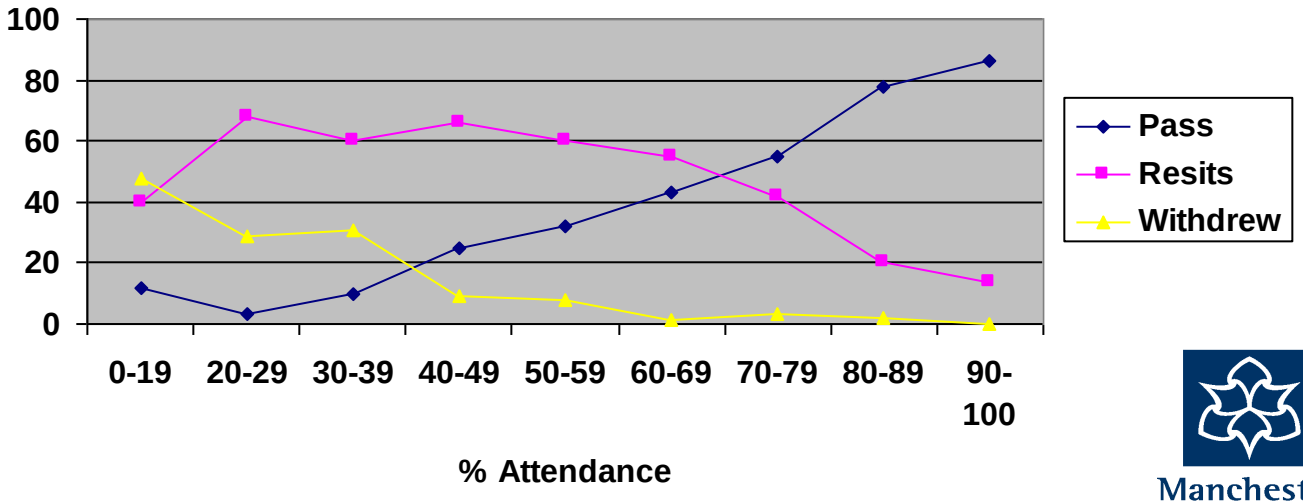
Action taken

- Additional pre-requisite unit for Law introduced (Justice)
- Total change of curriculum for Computing students
  - Computing unit replaced by 2 units – Introduction to Computing & Foundation Programming
  - Replacement of general mathematics unit with Mathematics for Computing
- Increased emphasis on classroom activities
- Change in assessment strategy

Attendance Management – a measure of motivation and engagement

- Enables identification of
  - students with difficulties – academic and/or personal
  - programme structural issues





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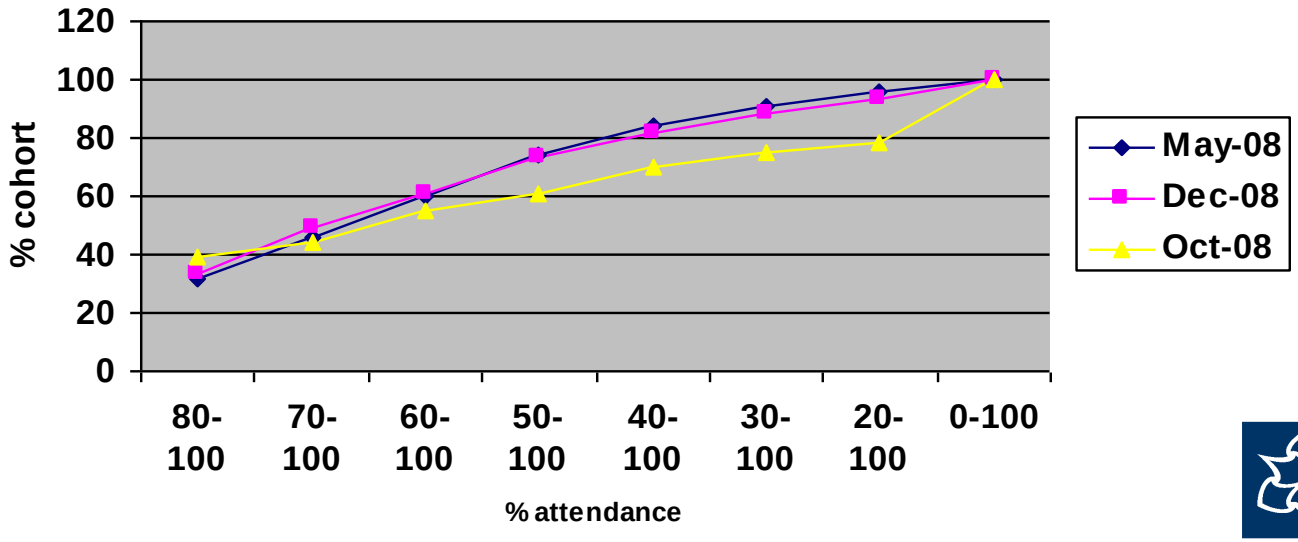
Attendance Management

- Protocol evolved in response to:
  - available resources
  - effectiveness (as measured by subsequent attendance levels)
  - need to complement other retention activities
  - student feedback
- Central database in which attendance at one key activity per week for each unit is registered for each student
- Interventions – letters / interviews

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Attendance Management - protocol

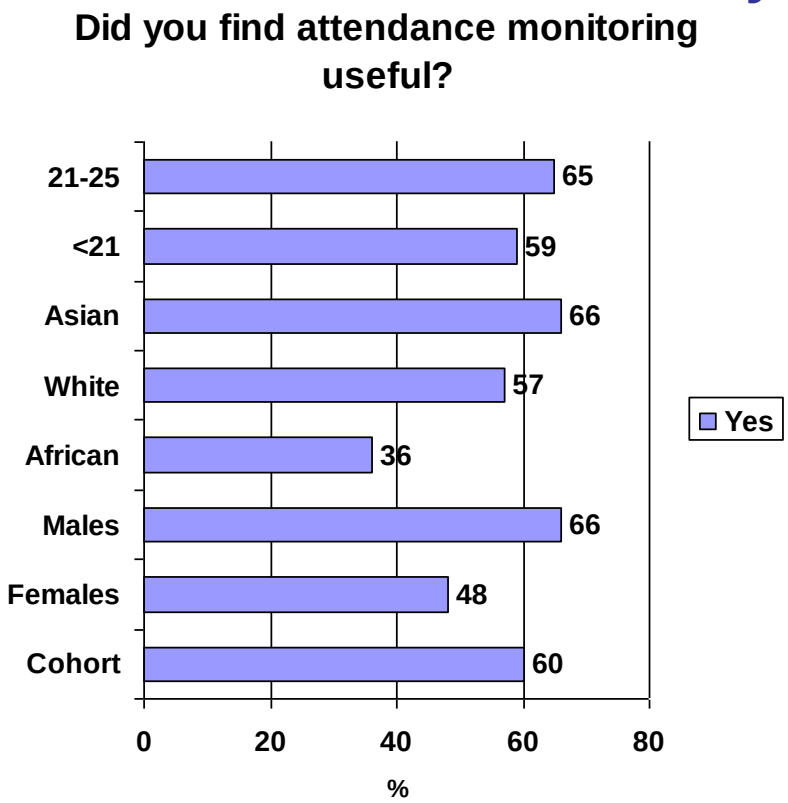
- Census date October 2007, subsequent letters / interviews in December and January
- Combined with early assessment exercise in universal core unit



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You can't please everyone

- But it is very important to know your students and find out what they think!



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Early Assessment Feedback Project

- W/c 1/10/07 - Students complete written formative assessment (personal statement) in core unit
- W/c 15/10/07 - Students receive written and individual feedback in class including “advice sheet”. Students complete a personal action plan in class
- W/c 29/10/07 – Students causing concern sent a letter inviting them to interview. Email sent to all students offering opportunity to see central tutor to discuss their progress to date
- W/c 5/11/07 and 12/11/07 - Interviews

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Early Assessment Feedback Project

- 78 students sent a letter
- 50% took up offer of interview – many of these were overseas or EU students, most subsequently passed the year at first sitting.

You can take a horse to water…..

- Students' views
  - 34 students (12%) admitted to receiving a letter
  - Of these only 32% attended the meeting but of those who did 82% found it useful
    - "diagnosed as dyslexic as a result"
    - "increased in confidence"

Don’t forget your tutors!

- Staff views
  - many felt that the work the students produced was the best piece of reflective work done all year
  - BUT some students revealed very personal information about their past which made it very difficult for the tutors to criticise written skills and placed them in an awkward ethical situation also

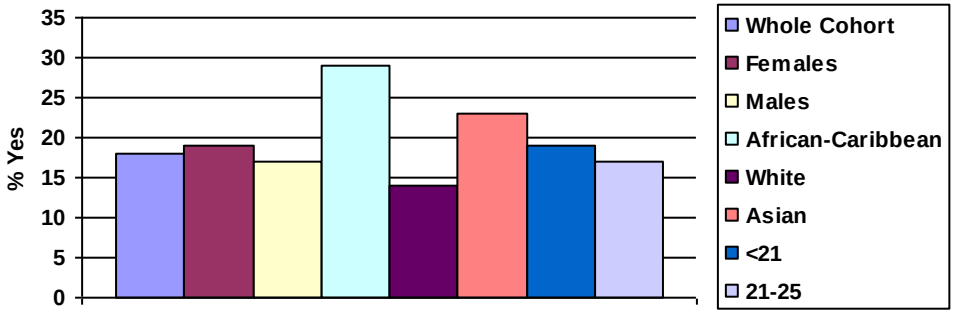
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Next year

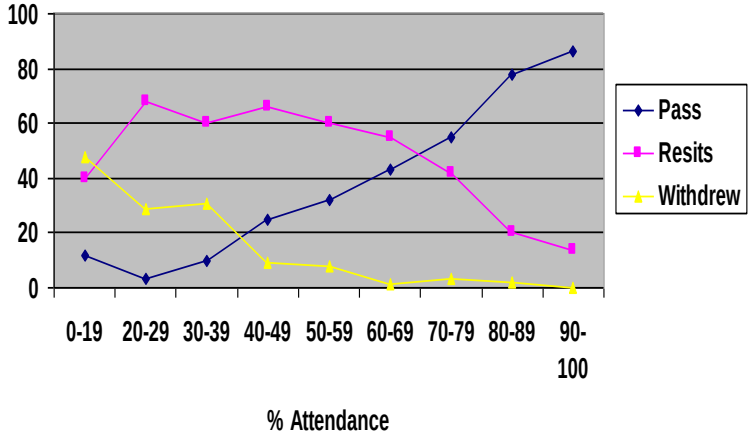
- Will repeat early assessment exercise but will give students a list of suggested topics to avoid personal revelations
- Modify intervention
  - replace invitation to interview with timetabled, group “essential skills sessions”, together with ongoing support on an individual basis if required, with the Student Support Officer

You still can't please everyone

- Personal Development Planning PDP) – any direct action taken?



- Have you made use of your Student Planner?



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What do you do? Why do you do it? How can/do you measure its effectiveness?

- Common reasons given for dropping out of University
  - Personal reasons
  - Financial reasons
  - Lack of pre-course information / having chosen the wrong course
  - Isolation – the need for peer and friendship networks
  - Being overwhelmed by induction
  - Remoteness of staff – especially when much of the early experience is in large lectures
  - Lack of timely and appropriate study skills support / support for disability and dyslexia requirements
  - Uncertainty regarding workload weighting, assessment criteria and level required
  - Lack of timely and meaningful feedback on assignments