# Optimally Maximising Student Retention in Higher Education

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## Introduction

The study reported here was carried out on a first year class of 163 students studying a range of engineering programmes at University. These students were supported by a radically different paradigm of first year academic and administrative management based on a new model of care, control and consistency – the 'Triple C Model'. The paradigm uses centralised absence management and assertive outreach which were key to the success of the initiative as evidenced in the statistical data gathered throughout the academic year 2000/01.

## Student Profile

The quest to improve the retention of students must start from a position of knowledge about the profile of the targeted student group. The profile of any student cohort could vary considerable depending on the subject area and University. Such information can be ascertained from admissions data, interviews and questionnaires. In the case of the study reported in this paper, a specific induction questionnaire was developed as a web based resource to allow for efficient analysis of the information gathered. The questionnaire was designed to identify the accumulated 'risk factor' of any individual student at point of entry. Risk factors were based on the literature and personal experience. Table 1 shows a sample of the results obtained when 94 questionnaires were returned and analysed.

### Table 1 - Questions and percentage YES responses

| Question | % of Students |
|---|---|
| Are you living away from your family home? | 25% |
| Are you the first person in your family to go to University? | 59% |
| Are you working more than 8 hours per week? | 42% |
| Do you know anyone else in your class at the moment? | 46% |

## The Student Experience

The student experience, particularly for first year entrants and those directly entering University through widening access routes, often leaves room for improvement. Much evidence exists in the literature to suggest that early drop out of students taking place in the first few weeks is considerable. The damage done at this embryonic stage of the student experience may not manifest itself for some months. Inevitably, many of these students will continue to exist on class registers as passive withdrawals, particularly where attendance is not being well monitored or efficiently collated. University statistics frequently discard early drop out students. This decision is justified by the fact that fees are not collected for students who leave or whose leaving date is back dated before some given threshold dates.

**A New Management and Support Model for the First Year Experience**

It was recognised that the way in which first year students were managed and supported needed to be changed if different rates of retention were to be achieved. The new management and support philosophy developed was based on the 'Triple C Model' of care, control and consistency. The idea of control in relation to a group of adult learners may seem controversial, but it is defended by the authors on the basis that the type of control involved is seen as almost parental and therefore benevolent.

care    control

consistency
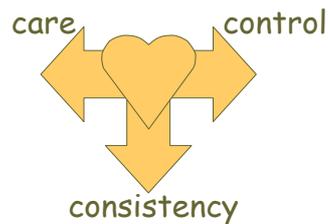
**Figure 1  - The Triple C Model**

The largely administrative traditional role of the first year tutor was developed into that of a First Year Czar. The First Year Czar had a remit to champion the needs and aspirations of fist year students within the school. The success of such a modified role was entirely dependent on the support, involvement and tolerance of other academic staff. The need for an improvement in the student experience was widely acknowledged and by keeping colleagues informed and seeking their comments, ownership of the first year experience was collectively held and nurtured by all staff throughout the school.

**Important Initiatives**

The quality and relevance of each element involved in the student support initiatives was extremely important. Some elements already existed, such as the personal tutor system. It was felt that the way in which the existing and new elements were integrated resulted in the sophistication and success of the completed and fully evolved initiative. The important elements are listed below.

- ➢ Preparation and Induction
- ➢ Personal Tutor Profiling
- ➢ Centralised Absence Monitoring
- ➢ Student Goal Setting
- ➢ Absence Management
- ➢ Assertive Outreach

Long before the first year students appeared in the University considerable effort was put into preparing the environment into which they would be received. This involved rationalising and rigorously checking the accuracy of timetables. Mindful of the work commitments of many students, timetables were modified to allow each student to have one full day without classes. Other changes were also made to minimise gaps of more than one hour and to equally distribute between groups the need for early start

or late finish classes. This attention to housekeeping details is an illustration of the care element in the Triple C Model'.

As soon as a prospective student firmly accepted an unconditional offer of a place on one of the engineering programmes, they were sent information about the fresher's activities that were being planned. A second letter with their own group timetable for their induction was then sent to them along with a personal invitation from the Dean of the School who would open the fresher's week activities.

Class lists were compiled from the firm acceptances of students and these formed the basis of class lists that were used prior to official lists being provided by the University student management system. The fresher's activities were concentrated into three days from 10am until 4pm. A mixture of ice-breaker activities, information, guest lectures and motivational group activities took place. The emphasis was on friendship and familiarisation trying to overcome the joint enemies of anonymity and lack of belonging.

Where possible, the staff working with the groups would later become the personal tutor supporting the element of consistency in the 'Triple C model'. The induction questionnaire was completed before or during these early days and early risk factor information also informed decisions for personal tutor groups.

The detailed monitoring of absence was achieved by centralising the function of collating absence data. This was done by supplying sign in sheets for all lectures, laboratories and tutorials for every module studied. These sheets were returned to the first year tutor and collated on a three weekly basis. A pastel traffic light system was evolved as detailed in Figure 2. Students were categorised into those whose attendance was either excellent, good or poor. Every student was then sent an attendance letter printed onto the appropriate colour of paper. Green letters were sent to those achieving more than 85% attendance, yellow to those whose attendance was between 75 and 85%. Pink letters to those whose attendance had dropped below 75% to an unacceptable level. All pink letters also had an appointment to attend a meeting with the first year tutor. Absence interviews were conducted on the basis of trying to identify and resolve issues contributing to the lack of attendance. These activities are indicative of the control aspects of the 'Triple C Model' implemented under the principle of assertive outreach.
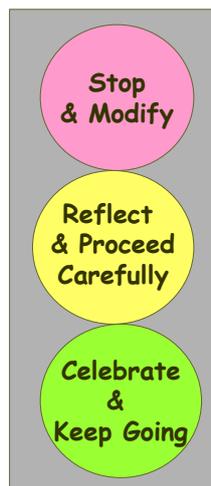


**Figure 2 – Coloured Letters**

Where appropriate other support systems of the university such as student counselors were then involved. It is noted that although absence itself is a problem it is frequently also the manifestation of greater problems. For this reason individual recovery plans were made with students. This sometimes involved alerting the teaching staff to the imminent return of a student and seeking their tolerance and support in making this process easier.

**Results and Discussion**

To verify the success of the initiatives developed and implemented to achieve optimally maximised student retention in this group of students, data was gathered for the year of the study and the 2 preceding years. The 163 students in this study were divided into programme groups - University Diploma (UD), BSc and BEng. These programmes have different entry requirements. Any student who enrolled to study is included in these statistics regardless of when they may have withdrawn. It is normal practice in statistical studies of first year withdrawal to discount students who withdraw early in the academic year. An important point to note about this study is that early withdrawals are NOT discounted. All students who enrolled at the start of the academic year are included. Had early withdrawals been discounted then the retention figures would have been even higher than those shown but, in the opinion of the authors, including all enrolled students provides a more honest assessment of the situation. A student is defined as 'retained' if she/he is a fee-paying student at the same University in the following academic year. This may mean that they have progressed or transferred internally to another programme. A small number of students would also be retained on the basis of repeating the year on medical grounds. This data is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2 Comparison of Retained Students**

|         | UD  | BSc | BEng |
|---------|-----|-----|------|
| 1999/00 | 40% | 63% | 65%  |
| 2000/01 | 55% | 68% | 63%  |
| 2001/02 | 60% | 81% | 92%  |