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Retaining Students to Completion: A Qualitative Study of Institutional Factors

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Retaining Students to Completion: A Qualitative Study of Institutional Factors

Abstract

Retaining students until they complete their qualifications is one of the main aims of many higher education institutions. Retention of students is also looked at from different perspectives in the literature. This small, exploratory, narrative enquiry research looks into the experiences of twenty-one domestic students during their first year and a half of a three-year bachelor's degree at a New Zealand university. The same researcher conducted all the interviews, which were recorded, transcribed and imported to Nvivo for thematic analysis. The researcher attempted to draw comparisons between the students who withdrew from the university within the first year and a half and those who did not in order to gain a deeper understanding of the institutional factors which may be involved in retention of students. Four main themes were found in the interview data, relating to expectations for student effort, guidance provided by instructors, feedback provided on assignments and consistency, which seemed to be significant to the university experience for many students.

Practitioner Notes

1. Preparing students for the workload involved in university study while in secondary school, and during first-year orientation sessions and courses may increase retention.
2. Universities should set expectations regarding how much information is shared with students regarding the content of examinations.
3. Providing assessment criteria to students before submitting assignments, and individualized feedback after submitting assignments may increase retention.
4. Lecturers and tutors should discuss course-level and university-level expectations, course content and assessment criteria to improve consistency of information obtained by students, which may increase retention.
5. Always focussing on effort and improvement factors, rather than mentioning the level at which courses are pitched may increase students' academic self-efficacy.

Keywords

Higher education, Retention, Withdrawal, Academic experiences, Institutional factors

Introduction

Retaining students until they complete their qualifications is one of the main aims of many higher education institutions. Research demonstrates that retaining students is a complex endeavour involving a range of factors. Many factors are related to the students who are admitted into higher education institutions; their academic preparation, their commitments outside of university and personal attributes such as motivation and grit. However, there are also a range of factors related to the institution. Some of these institutional factors are difficult to change, whereas others can be changed in efforts to improve the educational experiences of students (Aljohani, 2016). Factors that are malleable include; whether a sense of belonging is fostered, and what kinds of educational experiences, scaffolding and support are offered both within the curriculum and more broadly within the institution.

Retention of students is also looked at from different perspectives in the literature. Some focus on persistence, which is a student-centred approach to retention, while others focus on retention, an approach which focusses on the institution. This small, exploratory study focusses on the institution rather than students, and thus on retention rather than persistence. This narrative enquiry research will look into the experiences of twenty-one domestic students during their first year and a half of a three-year bachelor's degree at a New Zealand university. Their experiences will be analysed thematically to find areas in which the university may be able to make changes to increase retention. The research question guiding the inquiry is: What institutional factors can be identified that may contribute to students' decisions to leave university?

Literature

There has been a fairly large body of literature focusing on identifying aspects of educational experiences that may have an impact on the retention of students. Thomas (2002, p. 426) identified seven factors, including four institution-related factors (the academic experience, institutional expectations and commitment, academic and social match, and university support services). Cruce et al. (2006, p. 378) identified good practices such as “effective teaching, interaction with faculty and peers, high expectations and academic challenge” that affect persistence and found that these practices have a bigger effect on students with less educational capital, such as first-in-family students and those from certain minority groups. In addition, Reason et al. (2006, p. 155) found that “teacher behaviours such as preparation, availability and helpfulness, and rapport with students” were important for retention. Moreover, they found that the majority of the gains made by students throughout their four-year degrees were made in the first two years, demonstrating the importance of educational experiences in the early stages of undergraduate study, as students transition from secondary to tertiary education.

One model, introduced by Tinto (1997, p. 615), showed that the most important way of influencing

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students was to increase the “quality of student effort”. Increased student effort quality led to increased learning, which in turn led to retention of students. Increasing the quality of student effort was achieved through academic integration and social integration. Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022) adapted and expanded on Tinto’s model, identifying that in addition to the social system, the academic system and teaching were important to student retention. The academic system was made up of components such as grade point average (GPA), workload and support and guidance, while teaching included aspects such as instructional clarity, feedback, alignment, and coherence. In a more recent chapter, Tinto (2010) identified four factors that are crucial to retaining students: expectations, support, feedback, and engagement.

Expectations are an aspect of educational experiences that seem to have a clear connection with retention. Expectations were mentioned directly by Thomas (2002), Cruce et al. (2006) and Tinto (2010). In addition, Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022) include induction programmes as a good practice related to the academic system. Effective induction programmes are likely a result of increased clarity about the expectations of the university. Similarly, Tinto (2010) suggests students being told consistently and clearly what they need to do to succeed.

Apart from clear communication about expectations, Tinto (2010) also maintains that having high expectations of students is important to retention. Institutions and teachers having higher expectations leads to students learning more, which in turn leads to retention of students within the system. Kuh et al. (2007) found that there was a direct relationship between the level of effort students believed to be expected of them at university and the level of effort they put in. However, Schilling and Schilling (1999, p. 6) found that “there was a mismatch between what institutions say students must do to succeed and what students’ actual experiences with the institution has taught them is really necessary.” They found that students’ perceptions about the amount of time they would need to study were less than those of the institution and students’ own perceptions of how much effort is required to succeed at university decreased during their first year at university. More specifically, they found that the amount of time students spends studying remains constant throughout their university years, meaning that if institutions would like students to spend more time studying, they need to require them to do so to succeed in their first year of study.

Clarity of expectations should not only occur before students complete an assignment, grade information they receive afterwards is another method of communicating expectations. Hu et al. (2012) conclude that since students place so much importance on GPA information, institutions would improve university outcomes by increasing the accuracy of that information. Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2012) suggest that contrary to focussing on ways of encouraging students to persist for longer, students who had little chance of success persisted too long and it may be more effective to correct their misconceptions about the academic challenge of university study sooner.

Universities generally have some control over which students they accept and accepting only those who have stronger secondary school academic outcomes is highly likely to lead to less withdrawals (Mabel & Britton, 2018). However, at many universities there is pressure to accept larger numbers of students, so being more selective is likely to be unpalatable in many places. On the other hand, universities do have control over what occurs after admission. Thus, offering (or even mandating) additional support to incoming students with lower academic achievement at secondary school is likely to be effective in bridging academic gaps and helping such students to succeed at university.

Support is another aspect of students' academic experiences that has been found to be directly connected to retention. Specifically, the amount of support students perceive to be available to them correlates with academic competence. Apart from Tinto (2010), Thomas (2002) mentions support and Reason et al. (2006) mention 'availability and helpfulness' of teaching staff as factors affecting student retention. In addition, 'support from faculty' and 'support and guidance' are two different components within the academic system for Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022). It may be even more effective if the support comes from course instructors rather than from a central institutional support centre (Naylor et al., 2018).

Apart from being available for students and approachable when they have questions, another way in which teaching staff can provide support is through their feedback on student assignments. Tinto (2010) found feedback to be an important factor for student retention, and Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022) included feedback as one component of 'Teaching' in their retention model. Hattie (2008) found that feedback was one of the strongest predictors of learning. More specifically, Tinto (2010) suggested that feedback that differs from students' own perceptions of their performance is likely to have the most impact on learning. If students are not sure whether to persist in a course or programme of study, detailed constructive feedback provides a route along which to persist. Feedback leads to increased engagement in academic work and enables students to increase the quality of their effort by indicating the aspects of their work that would most benefit from effort.

Previous research shows that the more engaged a student is, the more likely they are to complete their programme of study (Tight, 2020). In recent years, the responsibility for student engagement has moved from the student to the institution (Tight, 2013). Thus, institutions that are able to engage students in "educationally meaningful activities", will find that students achieve better academic outcomes and that a larger number of them are retained (Kuh, 2008, p. 555). One important method of working to increase student retention, is to work with academic staff to make courses more engaging.

Method

The purpose of this study was to find institutional factors which may be related to the retention of students. Twenty-one students volunteered to be included in the study and those who withdrew within the first one and a half years of study were compared to those who continued at the university beyond the one-and-a-half-year mark.

Before data collection commenced, ethical approval was obtained from the institutional human ethics committee. All participants took part in the research voluntarily, after giving informed prior consent. They were free not to participate in interviews and not to answer questions unless they felt comfortable doing so.

Research Design

Narrative enquiry was employed in this research, through the thematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each of the 21 participants were interviewed within their first four weeks at university, and they proceeded to be interviewed at the end and beginning of each semester of study over the first year and a half of their three year Bachelor of Arts degrees. Students who continued their enrollment at the university for at least one and a half years had each participated

in six interviews. In addition to the regular interviews, any student who withdrew from the university at any time during their first one and a half years of study was invited to participate in one final exit interview to discuss this decision with the researcher.

The research asked different questions at each interview, which encouraged the participants to share their experiences with the researcher. The initial questions were general questions about students' experiences at university. For example, "How did your semester go?", followed by "Were there any surprises, anything different from what you expected?", followed by asking about each course the student had taken "You took course A, how did that go?" The discussion was then extended through the use of additional follow up questions, which probed into what the students said to reveal more about their experiences at university. In addition, some specific questions were added at different stages in the academic experience.

The same researcher conducted all the interviews, meeting with each participant four times a year, allowing the opportunity for a relationship to develop between the researcher and participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and imported to Nvivo for thematic analysis. The transcripts were read and analysed iteratively, allowing the themes to emerge from the transcripts, and to be further refined throughout the reading and coding process. The researcher attempted to draw comparisons between the students who withdrew from the university within the first year and a half and those who did not in order to gain a deeper understanding of the institutional factors which may be involved in retention of students.

Context

Fifty percent of secondary school leavers in New Zealand leave school with a university entrance qualification, allowing them to progress directly to university study (Ministry of Education, 2018). Of the students who enter university, 10% withdraw from their studies within the first year and a further 8% withdraw after completing at least one year of study (OECD, 2019). However, it has been found that students enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree seem to withdraw at higher rates (Harvey & Lucknow, 2014); in the Bachelor of Arts degree at the university where this research was conducted, data from the class of 2017 showed that 20% withdrew within the first year, 9% withdrew within the second year, and the remaining 71% of students completed their qualifications.

At New Zealand universities, large courses, such as those at first-year level, often consist of lectures and tutorials. Lectures are offered one to three times per week, for one to two hours per lecture. Tutorials are usually offered once a week for one hour. Tutorials are group discussion sessions focussing on the material covered in the weekly readings and lectures, with the goal of increasing understanding of the course content. Although all feature discussion of course content, there is a range of practices in terms of how tutorials are conducted, with some being more structured around specific questions or activities and others being relatively free discussion sessions. Tutorials are offered by the lecturer in small courses, whereas in larger courses they are planned by the lecturer but delivered by tutors. Tutors are employed on a part-time basis, while usually also studying full time, and paid for a fixed number of hours per week. In addition to offering tutorials, tutors also provide marking assistance, often marking all the smaller assignments, while the lecturer marks the larger assignments and/or final assignments.

At the university where this research was conducted, all tutors are required to complete one three-hour training session before they can offer tutorials and one two-hour training session before they can mark student work. In addition, for students who offer tutorials online, there is an online training module which must be completed before any online tutorials are offered.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a narrow group of students who have been found to be less likely to withdraw from their studies and who make up the largest number of students. This study focussed on domestic students, who had been born and grown up in New Zealand, and who had completed secondary education at a New Zealand school in the year immediately prior to their enrolment at university. The students were recruited to participate in the study at the beginning of the 2019 academic year, having completed secondary school at the end of the 2018 academic year. Within these parameters, it was attempted to recruit a group of students who were representative of the ethnic make-up of New Zealand and who represented as wide a range of academic performance as possible prior to their admission to university.

At the beginning of the 2019 academic year, 21 students were recruited to participate in this study. They consisted of four males (19%) and 17 females. In the Bachelor of Arts degree programme as a whole in 2019, 65% of students identified as female and 34% identified as male. Thus, males are slightly underrepresented in this study. In terms of the ethnicity of the participants, 13 were New Zealand Europeans (62%), four identified as Māori (19%), three identified as Pasifika background students (14%) and the remaining participant was a New Zealander of African heritage. The proportion of students from each ethnicity roughly matches the proportions of students from each ethnicity in the general population of domestic students in the Bachelor of Arts programme. Lastly, in terms of their academic achievement before entering university, all 21 students had completed the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) which is offered at New Zealand secondary schools. Nine students had achieved an 'Excellence' endorsement in NCEA (43%), six had achieved a 'Merit' endorsement (29%), five had 'Achieved' NCEA (24%) and the remaining student did not disclose their secondary school achievement level. In the nation as a whole in 2018, 15% of students achieved an 'Excellence' endorsement, 27% achieved a 'Merit' endorsement, and 9% achieved NCEA, while the remaining 49% of the student population did not achieve NCEA (New Zealand Qualification Authority, 2019). Since achieving NCEA is an admission requirement for entering university, any study of university students in New Zealand would only focus on the top 51% of academic achievers at the secondary school level. However, the recruited students are also somewhat skewed, consisting of a larger number of students who received an 'Excellence' endorsement and a larger number who 'achieved' NCEA, whereas students who received a 'Merit' endorsement are underrepresented in this study.

Table 1 shows the number of semesters in which each participant was enrolled at the university, the number of interviews they participated in, the total time spent interviewing them and the average length of each interview.

Table 1

Data collection

Student*	Number of semesters studied	Number of interviews	Total interview time	Average length of interviews
Alia	Ongoing	6	225 minutes	38 minutes
Amanda	2	5	205 minutes	41 minutes
Amelia	Ongoing	6	320 minutes	53 minutes
Andrew	Ongoing	6	248 minutes	41 minutes
Anna	Ongoing	6	248 minutes	41 minutes
Ava	Ongoing	6	161 minutes	27 minutes
Elsa	Ongoing	6	159 minutes	27 minutes
Ethan	2	5	170 minutes	34 minutes
Harper	Ongoing	3	160 minutes	27 minutes
Lara	Ongoing	6	216 minutes	36 minutes
Lorna	Ongoing	6	210 minutes	35 minutes
Maria	Ongoing	6	209 minutes	35 minutes
Nancy	Ongoing	6	230 minutes	38 minutes
Nate	2	5	133 minutes	27 minutes
Ned	4	3	60 minutes	20 minutes
Olive	Ongoing	6	257 minutes	43 minutes
Paula	Ongoing	6	244 minutes	41 minutes
Rebecca	Ongoing	6	231 minutes	39 minutes
Rhona	Ongoing	6	169 minutes	28 minutes
Solana	Ongoing	6	205 minutes	41 minutes
Ulla	Ongoing	6	188 minutes	31 minutes
Total		117	70 hours, 48 min	36 minutes

*All student names are pseudonyms.

Findings

There were four main themes found in the interview data. The first theme was expectations for student effort, the second was guidance provided by instructors, the third was feedback provided on assignments and the final theme was consistency, which seemed to be significant to the university experience for many students.

Expectations for student effort

Workload was mentioned by two students who withdrew from university and 10 who continued their enrollment. One student who withdrew, Amanda, stated that “At high school nothing ever

really clashed. I feel like at uni everything kind of clashes". A similar sentiment was expressed by two students who continued at university. Ulla, stated that "it's just like I have so much on at once." Another continuing student, Nancy, explained it this way "the work in classes will keep moving on even if you're doing an assignment on the topic from a couple of weeks ago. So you have to be keeping up with both."

Many of the students compared the workload in their first year at university to that at high school. Ned, who withdrew from university, found that the reading in particular was "a lot more than high school". Lorna, who continued studying, also found that the workload was "definitely more than high school", whereas Alia found that it was "just kind of a bit more". Another continuing student, Paula, felt that the workload varied greatly across the semester, and it was this variation that she struggled with:

I found the first six weeks of work really easy. And then as soon as I got back from the break uni got hard... rather than gradually getting harder, it was just really easy and then it suddenly got really hard.

On the other hand, two students who continued studying in the institution mentioned that the workload was fine for them. Reading their exact responses may shed some light on why this was. Anna, stated that "It's actually a lot more relaxed than I thought it would be... [Compared to high school] it's not so stressful... High school said that university would be really intense and stressful, but I haven't found that." Rhona, said it like this:

I found it fine because I expected it anyway. It was actually less work than I thought it would be... I thought I'd be drowning in it constantly, and it was all about time management. So, if I managed my time well, I was not stressed.

Both of these students had been primed at secondary school for the amount of work required at university. Compared to this, three students mentioned specifically that they were surprised. Ned, who withdrew from university, as well as Alia and Harper, who continued, all mentioned that the amount of work took them by surprise. This suggests the role that secondary schools can play in preparing their students for university, not only academically, but psychologically as well. If the workload is discussed with students at the secondary school level they may be better able to deal with it after admission to university.

Guidance provided by instructors

Two students who withdrew and seven students who continued their enrolment beyond the first year and a half mentioned guidance provided by their lecturers. Overall, the findings indicate that there is a great deal of variation between courses at the first-year level. One student who continued at university, Amelia, discussed guidance specifically in relation to exams:

How they're structured is very different. The public policy one just gave us hints about what would be in it. But we still had to study an overview of everything. The economics pretty much you just look at past exams and see the trends and patterns, but they didn't tell us anything about what would be in it. And then for Sociology, they told us the questions and said, 'pre-write your answers and basically learn them so that you can just come in'. So yeah, it was all very different.

One student who withdrew from university, Amanda, discussed one first-year course in which students were provided with a great deal of guidance about their assignments. However, rather than this guidance making it easier for students to meet the expectations, she felt that the expectations were raised in line with the level of guidance provided: “Because you have so much guidance, you have to get every little detail right”. On the other hand, another student who withdrew, Nate, stated that “It’s just very much individual study and I would say not that much guidance from the teacher... you just have to continue to meet the expectations of the course, and I would say without teachers’ help.” This was very similar to the ideas of another student, Harper, who continued at university:

It’s kind of like, ‘do it yourself, figure it out. We’ve given you the information. It’s up to you to take what you think is important and work with it.’ For me it’s like ‘actually, I’m not ready for that... I haven’t been prepared for that...’ We weren’t given this type of freedom. So I don’t know how to retrain my brain into thinking like that.

However, in contrast to these negative experiences, two students mentioned peer feedback being built into one of their assignments. Participating in peer feedback was worth 2% of the grade in that course and students were required to explain what peer feedback they received and how they applied that feedback when they submitted the final draft. One student was asked to come up with a research question and write a research proposal as the second assignment in a first-semester course. She mentioned that the feedback on the research proposal was very useful in helping her to refine the scope of her research. One other student was specifically informed that she could e-mail a draft of her assignment to her tutor to receive feedback on it. This student did this and while the feedback was not extensive, she did find it helpful for improving her assignment before submission.

It is unreasonable to expect university first year courses to provide the same level of guidance as those in secondary school. In addition, students are likely to encounter a wide range of practices across disciplines in terms of the amount of guidance provided in courses and this is an aspect of university which students need to adjust to. However, it is reasonable to expect that lecturers would openly and clearly communicate the expectations of assignments to students, rather than leaving students to figure this out for themselves.

Feedback provided on assignments

Another, somewhat related theme found in the interview data was about feedback. Feedback was mentioned by two students who withdrew from university and six who continued studying. One student who withdrew, Nate, focussed on feedback a great deal in his interviews. In particular, he had three complaints. Firstly, students were specifically told in one course that tutors were not allowed to provide feedback or advice before assignments were submitted. Rather, students had to work with the assignment information provided online and submit their best attempt. In addition, in the same course he complained that he received no written feedback whatsoever on assignments after they had been marked, only a number score. This was despite receiving failing grades in those assignments. Finally, students in that course were provided with the marking criteria after the assignments had been marked, when they were returned to students. In this sense, instead of informing students about what they were looking for in the assignment, the staff

involved in this course seemed to see the provision of the marking criteria as a form of feedback. Another student who withdrew, Ethan, also complained about feedback, but had quite a different experience from Nate: “They went easy on me. I felt like there were things they could have pinpointed that even I myself noticed... ‘I know what I didn’t do here, I won’t do that again.’ But... the feedback was a bit soft.” Although Ethan was quite capable of providing self-review on his own assignment, he was nevertheless disappointed not to receive that feedback on the assignment.

Although these two students both withdrew from university at the end of the first year and both had negative experiences relating to feedback, their negative experiences were very different. Nate was struggling to succeed at university, and the lack of feedback he received posed a major obstacle to him improving his performance. On the other hand, Ethan was academically well prepared for university, having achieved an “Excellent” endorsement in NCEA. Ethan’s main problem was that he was not engaged in his studies. This led to a situation where he could have achieved better than he did on his assignments with increased effort; he knew what he should do to improve his performance. However, he simply did not put in the effort necessary. Despite his lack of effort, and despite knowing what he should do to improve his performance, he was dissatisfied when instructors did not provide the constructive feedback he was expecting.

One student who continued at the institution also complained about a lack of feedback in one course she was taking. Nancy stated that

with the tests, they said they were going to give feedback. So I was like, you know, obviously quite excited to see how I could specifically improve, but they just gave generalized feedback to the whole course for each question. So I was like, ‘this isn’t really helpful... I don’t really know what I need to improve on.’

More specifically, one student who continued his studies mentioned the format of the feedback he received. In one course he received written comments on his assignment, whereas in another course he received feedback on the grading rubric. The lecturer had highlighted the appropriate descriptor relating to each criterion, provided a numeric score for each criterion and added comments related to each criterion. He found this feedback more helpful than that which he experienced in other courses: “it’s so clear what I’m being graded for.”

Consistency between teaching staff

The final theme relating to learning experiences which was discussed in the interviews was consistency between teaching staff. This theme was expressed in relation to inconsistencies, mainly between course lecturers and tutors, which seemed to be more salient to students than consistencies. Different kinds of inconsistencies were mentioned by one student who withdrew from university and three students who continued their studies. Amanda, who withdrew from university, mentioned a mismatch in one of her courses between the lecturer’s understanding of what students should be expected to know and the background knowledge she actually had. While Amanda reported her lecturer saying “you don’t have to have any knowledge of statistics”, Amanda had actually taken statistics up until the end of secondary school, had come directly from secondary school into university and yet did not feel she had enough background knowledge to understand the course, still finding it “quite difficult”. A similar mismatch was found in a very different subject: Political Science. Although Political Science is not taught at secondary school in

New Zealand, one student who continued in the institution, Elsa, stated that “You need to have some knowledge beforehand of the concepts they’re talking about, I think.”

Another continuing student mentioned mismatches between the instructions and grading criteria for the assignments (presumably designed by lecturers) in one course and criteria mentioned by tutors in their feedback on marked assignments. In one case, Lorna mentioned that:

In the prompt it says you don't need a formal introduction or conclusion... It says you can put like 1 to 2 sentences at the beginning and end to back up your claims, but it's not necessary. And I think my tutor expected us to have quite a good introduction and conclusion because... she would talk about the introduction [in tutorials] and maybe I should have learnt by the third one that she was expecting that. But it wasn't in the prompt.

In addition, in this same course the student mentioned receiving feedback that they should have added a title to their final assignment. However, a title was not mentioned anywhere in the grading criteria and the student had submitted all her previous assignments without a title and had never received this feedback. Similarly, the final mismatch mentioned by another continuing student was between what was said by her tutor and the reality of what was needed to succeed in the course.

talking to my tutor, she was like, 'only do the readings that you feel, because some of them are really hard, she was like, do the ones you can handle. Look at all of them, but they aren't that necessary for first year.'...[Later in the trimester] I went back and did, I think all of the readings, and then, that was pretty helpful actually. I understood it a lot better after that.

Clearly, it is important for lecturers who set assignments and grading criteria and tutors who mark those assignments to communicate clearly about their expectations of assignments. More importantly, it is unlikely that any lecturer would tell first-year students that they do not need to read the required readings in a course. While many lecturers may think that it goes without saying that required readings need to be read by students, this example demonstrates that such aspects of course design and delivery that go beyond assessment and assignments should also be clearly communicated with tutors to ensure students have a consistent experience at university.

Discussion and Implications

Overall, the themes found in this study match fairly closely with the ‘institutional conditions for student retention’ identified by Tinto (2010). The theme ‘workload’ is similar to Tinto’s condition ‘expectations’. The theme ‘guidance provided by teachers’ is similar to Tinto’s condition ‘support’. The theme ‘feedback on assignments’ is similar to Tinto’s theme ‘feedback’. This suggests that students’ perspectives are similar to those of institutions. However, engagement was not a significant theme in this research, and as well as Tinto’s institutional conditions, consistency between teaching staff was identified as another institutional condition which may have an impact on retention in this context.

Expectations of student effort

The findings relating to expectations for student effort showed that students had a wide range of perceptions of the amount of work expected of them. More than the amount of effort actually required to succeed in the first year, clear communication about the amount of effort required at as early a stage as possible seems to be important to retention, as mentioned by Tinto (2010). Students who knew that the workload at university would be high seemed better prepared to put in the required effort than those who were taken by surprise. In addition, the results showed that students who had experienced a higher workload at secondary school were better prepared to manage the workload expectations at university. Thus, secondary schools may have an important role to play, not only with academic preparation for university, but also to prime students for the expectations of university and prepare them with skills to manage their time well. Nevertheless, it is also important for universities to communicate the workload expectations to students as early as possible through an induction programme (Qvortrup & Lykkegaard, 2022) and during their first-year classes. More explicit guidance could also be provided to students within each first-year course about the workload expectations of that course and of each assignment or task within that course.

In addition to clear communication about effort, greater consistency in the amount of effort required after entering university may also aid in retention. One student mentioned the workload suddenly increasing in the middle of the first semester, which may be harder to manage than a more constant workload across the semester. Apart from meaning that students are very busy during the second half of the semester, the light workload in the first half of the semester may give students a false sense of security about the amount of effort expected. Because of the light workload, they may fill up their time with part-time work and extra-curricular activities, making it harder for them to find the time required in the second half of the semester. Thus, it is recommended that attempts be made to balance the amount of effort required across the semester. One way of doing this may be to include more readings in the first half of the semester, and less in the second half of the semester. Ideally, assignments should also be spread throughout the semester. However, this may be difficult to achieve because of the two week add-drop period at the beginning of each semester which means that students may not attend class until the third week of the semester.

Guidance provided by instructors

In terms of the students experiences of guidance provided by instructors, inconsistencies were found not across the semester but rather between courses, especially in relation to examinations. Although faculty may feel that they should have autonomy over the amount of guidance they provide to students about what will be in their examinations, it may be useful to create guidelines for faculty about the amount of guidance expected by the university. This may serve to iron out some of the vast differences between students and allow them to feel more confident in their ability to succeed at university. Differences in the amount of guidance provided about assignments were also found, in addition to guidance being offered in different forms.

At the more supportive end of the spectrum, some academic staff provided example assignments that were in the same format as the assignment to be completed by students, but about a different topic. Some students mentioned that they wanted this form of guidance in all courses. However, this may have the effect of limiting the originality with which students approach their assignments. Many academic staff eschew a cookie-cutter approach to assignments, instead hoping that each

student will approach an assignment in their own way, as appropriate for the ideas they would like to discuss in the assignment. An example assignment can only be offered if the academic staff member has a particular structure in mind that they would like students to follow. Whereas many staff allow much broader scope for students when completing assignments, not wishing to prescribe a particular method of organization.

Another method of supporting students with their assignments was through providing a generic set of guidelines for written work in a particular discipline, programme, or course. However, some students in this study found the guidelines on offer to be too generic, only covering aspects that they already knew about from secondary school. This is similar to a finding of Lea and Street (2000). Only one student in this study (Amanda, who withdrew from university) found such generic guidelines to be useful when working on assignments. It may be preferable to prepare a shorter set of guidelines focussing on the specific requirements of each assignment in a course.

Another method of providing guidance about assignments is through the provision of the assessment criteria, ideally in the form of a detailed assessment rubric that will be used to assign grades (see Ruegg, 2022). Some students in this research complained about the rubric being provided after an assignment was completed and submitted, as a form of feedback. There is a great deal of benefit to students when they self-assess their performance against the grading criteria (e.g. Boud, 2013). However, if assessment criteria are not shared with students until after they have completed and submitted their assignment, those who would like to practice self-assessment or even just consult the assessment criteria while working on the assignment are denied that opportunity.

The final method of guidance mentioned by students was scaffolding which was built into assignments. For example, students commented positively on an assignment which included two submissions: a research proposal followed by a research paper. They also mentioned two different courses in which receiving and responding to peer feedback was built into assignments. Such practices result in formative feedback as scaffolding (Shute, 2008).

Feedback provided on assignments

Although not all students arrived at university with clear expectations about what kinds of feedback they would receive at university, it was blatantly obvious to students when the feedback they received was unsatisfactory. Nate, in particular, had no clear preferences regarding feedback at the time of entry to university, but at the end of his first semester he stated “I am of the opinion that feedback for important tests should be included in my grade. This would help me to identify what I need to work on.” This finding echos the idea of Higgins et al. (2001), who emphasize ‘feeding forward’ into future assignments rather than simply feeding back.

No student in this study complained about a lack of praise, and neither were any positive experiences reported relating to praise. In every case, negative feedback experiences related to a lack of constructive feedback, and positive feedback experiences related to the presence of constructive feedback. Feedback is perhaps the area where the greatest amount of improvement could be made to increase retention. Three of the four students who withdrew from university were passionate when talking about the lack of feedback they experienced, and it was one of the main topics of discussion for these three students in their first year of university. Moreover, not

only those who withdrew but also some students who continued their studies were frustrated by insufficient feedback on their work.

Consistency between teaching staff

Inconsistencies between lecturers and tutors are more difficult to improve upon than other issues. Due to financial constraints, it may be difficult not only for lecturers, but also for tutors to find the time required for detailed discussion about course-level and university-level expectations. However, ample communication between lecturers and tutors is important, to make sure they are on the same page about not only the subject matter, but also the expectations of the university, the discipline, the course and each assignment students are required to complete. One solution may be to require tutors to observe lectures and tutorials offered by the lecturer, so that they hear how the lecturer talks about the assignments and course content. While this would add expense for the university, it would likely reduce inconsistencies between lecturers and tutors, especially if the tutor has not taken the course themselves or the course is being taught by a different lecturer from the one who taught them.

In addition, tutors are usually selected on the basis of their own strong academic performance in the subject they are employed to tutor, so lecturers may believe that tutors are ‘good students’ who will share good study practices with the students in their tutorials. However, some students may succeed despite their study habits rather than because of them and some students require a great deal more effort than others to succeed at university. If students employed as tutors came to university well-prepared academically, they may not be aware of how much effort may be required on the part of other students to reach the same level of success. Therefore, detailed focus on the wide range of levels of academic preparation, study habits, learning styles and attitudes to study would be a valuable addition to tutor training programmes in efforts to increase inclusivity of tutorials.

Teaching staff are likely to feel that they are supporting student self-efficacy by reassuring students that they do not need any prior knowledge of the subject they are studying. However, this may backfire if students subsequently find the subject to be difficult, having a significant negative effect on their self-concepts. It may be preferable for teaching staff to always focus on effort and improvement factors when discussing courses, rather than mentioning the level at which a course is pitched. Indeed, staff overestimating the difficulty of a course is likely to increase student effort and in turn lead to increased retention (Qvortrup & Lykkegaard, 2022; Tinto, 2010), whereas underestimating the difficulty could be harmful to students’ academic self-efficacy.

Conclusion

There are several limitations with this research which limit the generalizability of the findings. Most importantly, this research was conducted in a single institution within a single geographical context. Research in different institutions, but especially in different geographical contexts, is likely to yield different findings. In addition, only 21 students participated in this research. Although 117 interviews were conducted with those 21 students, representing depth of data, broader research involving a larger number of students may yield different results. Nevertheless, the findings of this

research did identify issues that posed difficulties for the students and allowed the identification of specific areas in which further research is warranted.

Suggestions for further research

In the context where this research was conducted, there is a shared understanding that for every credit earned by a student, on average 10 hours of effort is required. Most staff and students are aware of this guideline. However, it is at the discretion of the coordinator of each course to determine the number of contact hours, course readings and assignments that make up each course. It would be worthwhile to collect more detailed information from students about how many hours they actually need to spend to complete the requirements of each course. This information would help course coordinators to adjust the requirements of each course so that they are more closely aligned with other courses and with the university guideline.

Another line of research is suggested, focussing on the guidance provided by instructors. A further narrative study could focus on which specific aspects of assignments students struggle with and in which areas they require more or less guidance. In addition, further research could be conducted with both instructors and students to find out the types of guidance they prefer and the reasons for those preferences.

Further research into students' perceptions of different feedback practices is required which includes a larger number of students. Understanding perceptions of a larger number of students would allow clearer pedagogical recommendations to be made. It would be difficult to collect enough information about feedback practices from all courses across the humanities and social sciences. However, such research could combine instructors' reports on their feedback practices and students' perceptions of the feedback received in those instructors' courses.

A final recommendation resulting from this research involves collecting data from both lecturers and tutors teaching on the same course and comparing their perspectives. Such research could focus on a range of topics such as expected qualities of assignments, expectations of assignments at different grade levels and expected learning activities to be undertaken by students outside of the classroom. A useful addition to collecting data through questionnaires or interviews would be conducting observations of lecturers and tutors discussing the same content with students.

Concluding remarks

The system of Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2022) includes all the themes found in this study and appears to be the most relevant and comprehensive system of institutional factors predicting attrition. In this study it was found that components of the academic system and teaching components contributed to difficulties face by students in their first year and a half of study. However, the social system was outside of the scope of this research. Several aspects of the academic system and teaching could be improved in the current context by the university, programmes of study, individual courses and instructors, which would be likely to have a positive effect on student retention. In particular, students struggled to deal with the amount of effort expected of them, the lack of guidance provided by instructors, insufficient constructive feedback offered on their assignments and inconsistencies between the expectations and requirements of different stakeholders within the educational institution.

Conflict of Interest

The author discloses that she has no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The author discloses that she has not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at her respective university.

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