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Conceptions of early leaving: a comparison of the views of teaching staff and students

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ABSTRACT Recent synthesizing work on the student retention literature suggests two divergent discourses. The first is a discourse of assimilation which locates the problem in individual students' circumstances or abilities. This is challenged by an emerging discourse of adaptation. The new discourse focuses on higher education itself, proposing fundamental changes to adapt universities to a new purpose in a changed society. Here we present findings from interviews with teaching staff, which formed part of a multi-method investigation into attrition. Drawing on Zepke and Leach's (2005) model, we contrast the conceptions of early leaving suggested in these interviews with our previously reported findings from interviews with students who had considered leaving but stayed, and students who had withdrawn. We find staff more likely than students to externalize attrition in terms which problematize students. Students were more likely to focus on issues relating to their experiences of the university.

KEYWORDS: *attrition, conceptions, nurse education, reasons for leaving, retention, students, teaching staff*

Introduction

Retention of students is an issue across higher education. The desire to widen participation has resulted in significant growth in student numbers, but also higher levels of attrition across the sector. Retention is therefore an issue of increasing concern to higher education institutions and the focus for much research and development activity.

This article draws on findings from a multi-method research project on student retention in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at the University of the West of England, Bristol. The project was funded by the local

Workforce Development Confederation and aimed to inform strategic institutional change to improve retention. The data collection focused on the pre-registration course in adult nursing, which is the largest programme in the faculty, with relatively high rates of attrition. The full project report for the university and the Workforce Development Confederation (Young et al., 2006) includes a package of 47 recommendations which are currently being discussed and implemented. Implemented in full, these recommendations would result in fundamental changes in the culture and structure of provision within the faculty. In this article we present the views of the teaching staff and discuss these in relation to the contrasting views of attrition suggested by the interviews with current and former students (Glogowska et al., 2007). The views of staff are particularly important, as effective implementation of the package of recommendations relies on commitment from all staff to a process of holistic and fundamental change in the culture of higher education.

Changing conceptions of student attrition and retention

Concerns over retention have led to the growth of a literature seeking to understand the problem of attrition, and to propose or evaluate strategies for improving retention. Within this literature, there are tensions in the conceptualization of the relationship between individual and institutional factors. In a recent systematic review of research on retention, Zepke and Leach (2005) suggest there are two approaches to the issue: one which looks at assimilation – fitting students into the institution; and a newer approach which looks at adaptation – where institutions change to accommodate diverse student needs. Adaptation involves practical and cultural issues. On a practical level, students are no longer studying full-time: the majority are employed whilst studying, and many have family and other commitments. Zepke and Leach suggest that institutions need to change how they manage the undergraduate experience to enable students to remain connected to their lives outside the university. Students also arrive with particular cultural capital. This is: ‘a symbolic rather than material resource that includes, for example, informal interpersonal skills, habits, manners, linguistics, educational credentials, lifestyle preferences, conceptual knowledge, particular speech patterns and culturally specific learning tools’ (2005: 53). When the students’ cultural capital is valued and fits with the institution they are ‘fish in water’; when cultural practices are deemed inappropriate, incongruent, deficient or invalidated, students are more likely to experience acculturative stress and consider dropping out.

There has been a tendency to move away from the approaches which locate the problem in individual students' circumstances or abilities and towards an approach which argues for more fundamental adaptation of higher education to a new function and purpose in a changed society. This shift in focus was noted at a recent conference on student retention (Student Retention, Progression and Social Inclusion, Bath Spa University, September 2006) where papers, mostly from academics working in specialist roles to improve retention or researching retention demonstrated an emerging consensus, emphasizing adaptation rather than assimilation. There is little evidence, however, to suggest that the developments in thinking represented in the literature reflect, or have impacted on, the views of ground-level teaching staff. In a paper which draws on two research studies with staff and students to compare views on factors to improve retention in the context of widening participation, Thomas (2006) finds that staff are more likely to draw on a deficit model of the diverse student populations newly entering higher education as a result of widening participation. This model 'positions students as lacking and in need of change to fit into and succeed in a largely unchanged higher education system' (2006: 117). Where Thomas tends to limit her argument to 'non-traditional students' (2006: 118), previous research with Social Policy lecturers, carried out by one of the present authors, found this deficit view expressed by staff more generally (Irving and Young, 2005).

There have been previous studies which have focused on students who have left without completing their course (Davies and Elias, 2003; Thomas, 2002; Yorke, 1999) and other studies which have included data from continuing students (for example, Christie et al., 2004; Trotter and Cove, 2005) as well as studies which have looked at staff (for example, Layer et al., 2002). Our research is, we believe, unique in providing interview data from teaching staff, students who thought of leaving but stayed, and students who had withdrawn, from a single programme. We are able to make comparisons between the three perspectives.

Methods

The research project combined quantitative and qualitative methods of primary data collection and analysis. The data sources for the whole project are summarized in Table 1 below, with the data sources selected for this article indicated in bold type. The quantitative data provided evidence from large numbers of students whilst the qualitative sources provided means for a deeper exploration of the views and experiences of smaller numbers of students and staff, enabling richer forms of data to be presented.

Table 1 Summary of data sources

Student database	SPSS analysis	7092 student records – 2765 adult nursing students
Teaching staff	Face-to-face interviews	30 interviews
Students on the programme	Questionnaires	184 questionnaires
Students on the programme	Face-to-face interviews	30 interviews
Support services staff	Face-to-face interviews	13 interviews
Students who have withdrawn	Telephone interviews	19 interviews

Successful applications were made to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee for each part of the data collection process. All participants received detailed information sheets about the project which stated their rights to refuse to participate and to withdraw at any stage in the proceedings. At the beginning of the face-to-face interviews the interviewees signed consent forms: consent for the telephone interviews was recorded.

This article focuses on explanations of attrition derived from the interviews with teaching staff and compares these with data from the interviews with current and former students. The sampling frame used to select staff for interview included all staff teaching on the pre-registration adult nursing programme, except those on secondment or very new to the job. Staff selected for interview included all those who, in addition to teaching, have roles of personal tutor or programme leaders; and a randomly selected sample of other staff teaching on the programme. The interviews were semi-structured and sought to understand staff perceptions of the nature of the issue of attrition and the use of preventative procedures to improve retention. The interviews also collected feedback on the various aspects of the programme and suggestions for improvements. The interviews were recorded and notes written up by the interviewer. These notes have been collated and summarized.

The sampling process for current students began with a questionnaire issued to second year students. The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify students who had considered leaving the university and to seek permission to contact students to arrange an interview. 184 questionnaires were returned and interviews were then arranged with 30 students who stated on the questionnaire that they had at some point considered leaving the programme. The interviews were semi-structured and sought to understand the factors which are significant to students in decisions to remain on their programme. The interviews were recorded on audio-tape and full transcripts made. The transcripts were thematically analysed using computer software (NVivo).

In their recent and authoritative report on working class 'drop-out', Quinn et al. (2005) report on the methodological problems encountered by researchers seeking to understand early withdrawal, and the resulting low response rates. In our project, the university's student database was used to identify an initial sample of students who had chosen to withdraw from adult nursing courses. Letters were sent out to 81 former students explaining the project, detailing the questions to be asked and guaranteeing confidentiality. A form and a pre-paid envelope were provided to permit students to refuse their permission to be contacted by telephone.

Attempts were made to contact the students over a two-month period in the summer of 2005. 204 telephone calls were made, resulting in 19 completed interviews. Permission was sought to tape-record the interviews and respondents were assured that they could ask for any part of the interview not to be taped or for the conversation to be terminated at any point. None did so and all interviews were completed at the first attempt. The tapes were transcribed and have been thematically analysed.

Findings from interviews with teaching staff

The findings from the interviews with teaching staff present a picture of staff conceptions of attrition and understandings of students' reasons for early withdrawal. These data were provided in response to two areas of questioning: the first seeking to explore conceptions of retention and the second asking about students' reasons for leaving.

Conceptions of attrition

The interviewees were asked if they saw retention as a problem. In only three cases did the answer come in the form of an outright 'No'. 'Yes' answers were, however, qualified in a number of ways. A number of staff acknowledged that retention is a problem for the organization because of the financial implications of the contracting process, but not for students or nursing. For example:

Yes but only from a financial point of view for the University, I don't think it's a problem for nursing and I don't think it's a problem for students. It's a problem in terms of the contract process.

Attrition, although recognized, is seen by some as part of the selection process for nursing, ridding the profession of people unsuitable for nursing or not able to meet the demands of the course. Eleven out of the 30 respondents expressed this view, represented below by the interviewee who suggests:

Any programme leading to a professional role – is part of the selection process of the professional group. So the idea of trying to keep people who blatantly

shouldn't be kept, that have made a decision that this job isn't for them, seems to be fool-hearted.

Generally staff were inclined to see the level of attrition as inevitable in terms of the demands of the job, availability of other careers, and the quality of students accepted on to the course. Many of the interviewees expressed a belief that students leave for reasons beyond control of the university.

Linked to the conception of attrition as a result of factors relating to students rather than to factors internal to the university, the interviews suggested that many staff do not believe that anything can be done which will make a difference. For example:

I don't think there's any issues around attrition that have happened to my personal tutor group that I could have had any influence over whatsoever. All of them that were leaving came to see me and I asked them was there anything that they thought I could help them with, was there anything I could do to change their mind? But in all situations, they had all made up their minds and they were all leaving for the right reasons as far as I could see.

This position is however contradicted, to some extent at least, by responses in the later part of the interview which suggested that staff could identify a number of difficulties in the programme and ways in which students could be better supported and have an improved experience (see Young et al., 2006).

The teaching staff were asked for their understandings of the reasons for students leaving the nursing programme. Their responses are collated in Table 2. Most interviewees gave more than one reason, and again many stressed the complex and multi-faceted nature of the issue. Responses can be summarized into the following categories:

- students' wrong choice of course;
- pressures on students: personal and home lives; finance; health;
- the demands of the course; and
- placement issues.

Seventeen of the interviewees included a reference to students making a wrong choice of career or having unrealistic expectations of nursing or nurse education. Some of these poor decisions were attributed to the university's selection procedures which take unsuitable students; some to the influence of media, for example television programmes which tend to over-dramatize nursing, and under-play the care of chronic elderly patients.

Some students have got an unrealistic expectation of what nursing is all about, and that may be for a variety of reasons but I do think sometimes that the media has a part to play in that and so when they hit practice, the kind of hard work aspect of it is something they've completely under-estimated. They're not doing the kind of high drama ER experience. They're dealing with perhaps

challenging people, people that are not easy to deal with, in some instances older people who they find difficult, particularly for the younger students.

Three further responses included a reference to the undesirable nature of the job or the levels of accountability required of nurses. Four suggest the NHS itself is the problem with aspects such as the hierarchical structure not appealing to contemporary young people.

The most frequent kinds of response placed the emphasis on factors relating to students. This emphasis is summed up in the following quotation:

The vast majority – 90% – leave because of personal reasons and some leave because nursing is not for them.

Sixteen interviewees refer to financial problems, for example:

For a lot of people the problem is simply finance. They just can't cope on the amount of money they are getting ...

and

I've got to put finance at the top ... I see finance as absolutely key...

Five interviewees referred to pressures of working to earn extra money; ten to family issues and caring commitments; seven to personal difficulties, five to homesickness and six to health problems. Eight refer more generally

Table 2 The views of teaching staff on students' reasons for leaving

<i>Reasons for students leaving</i>		<i>Respondents</i>
Mismatch between expectations and experience of the course	Wrong choice of career/ unrealistic expectations of nursing or nurse education	17
Pressures on students	Financial problems	16
	Pressures of working	5
	Family issues/caring commitments	10
	Personal difficulties	7
	Homesickness	5
	Health problems	6
Demands of the course	Complex lives generally	8
	Size of programme	4
	Demands of course	6
	Academic work	6
Placement issues	Lack of support	5
	Placements	8

to students' complex lives. Several suggest that academic difficulties are not common in explanations for leaving.

Reasons linked to the university are mentioned less commonly: four interviewees suggest the programme is too large to meet students' needs; five that the demands of the course in terms of level, volume and timing of work causes problems; one refers to the curriculum of the first year which is not appropriate to the entry levels of the students.

The pattern is complicated. There is a wide range of academic abilities for which the curriculum doesn't allow. There is pressure from the start. It seems inappropriate to expect people who are new to health care to take on an IP module and write extensive essays. So the reasons are academic expectations combined with course design and the inappropriateness of the first year content.

Five responses refer to the lack of support offered by the university. Time-tabling issues are mentioned by two interviewees and academic grounds by six respondents

Placements are mentioned by eight interviewees. Issues relating to placements include the length of the placements and difficulties of bullying of students by staff within placements; lack of support within placements; the need to juggle academic work with full-time placements; and problems relating to travel.

Comparing staff and student conceptions of attrition

Here we discuss the findings described above from the interviews with 30 teaching staff in relation to the data we collected from interviews with 30 students currently studying in the second year of the pre-registration programme, and 19 interviews with students who left the programme (Glogowska et al., 2007). Whilst there are common features across the data, we argue that there are significant and important differences, which need to be recognized and explored by staff in HEIs as a starting point for new policies and practice to improve retention.

Conceptions of attrition

We described above how 11 out of the 30 teaching staff interviewed provided a response which suggested a view of attrition as functional in terms of selection for nursing, weeding out students not suitable for nursing. This view was not borne out by the evidence provided from our interviews with students who had left the programme. Most strikingly, a significant proportion of the students were currently studying on health courses (4 out of 19) or hoping to return to studying on a nursing or health care course in the

future (7 respondents). Eight out of 19 were still working in the health and social care sector. This data also challenges the view expressed by 17 staff respondents which suggested students drop out because they have made the wrong choice of career. Obviously we did not interview all students who left and recognize that staff views may be correct in some cases.

The findings from the students who remained on the programme also challenge the staff perspective on students who leave. The questionnaires to the second year cohort found that a majority of students (55.3%) had considered leaving at some point; and the interviews with the two groups of students found more similarities than differences between the students. We would not want to argue that all attrition is undesirable from the point of view of the nursing profession, but our findings suggest that at least some students who leave constitute a loss to the nursing profession.

Students' reasons for leaving

We have suggested above that teaching staff tend to explain students' decisions to leave in terms of factors that locate the problem with the individual students. Although teaching staff were able to identify problematic aspects of the programme and to make suggestions for improvements, these were not offered in response to the question on students' reasons for leaving or, when mentioned, not linked directly to reasons why students might leave. When we compare this with the explanations offered by the students who left the programme, summarized in Table 3 below, we find two significant differences.

Although there is clearly some degree of overlap, there is a significant difference in the balance of types of explanations offered. Students are more likely to identify factors relating to their experience of university education on the programme, in comparison with factors which relate to personal issues or circumstances. For example, 13 students mentioned insufficient support, whereas this was not mentioned at all by staff as a response to the question about students leaving. (When asked directly about student support however, many of the staff identified this as an area where provision was patchy or did not always meet students' needs.) Similarly, six student respondents referred to a lack of guidance from staff on coursework: whereas this was not an issue referred to by staff in this context. The interviews with the students who thought about leaving and stayed also demonstrated this different balance of explanations with key reasons for thinking of leaving being academic work (identified by 9 students) and lack of support (identified by 8 students).

A more subtle difference lies in the different perspectives on the same issue. For example, if we look at the issue of the mismatch between expectations of the course and the realities of the student experience, we can see differences in the language and perspectives of the students and the staff. The teaching

Table 3 Factors reported by students who had withdrawn as contributing to their decision to leave

<i>Reasons for leaving</i>		<i>Respondents</i>
Mismatch between expectations and experience of the course	Disappointment over content of course curriculum	7
Pressures on students	Transport difficulties – both attending university and on placement	10
	Separation from boyfriend/friends/family members	4
	Difficulties within family such as illness, bereavement, arranging childcare	5
	Financial strain	14
	Pregnancy	1
Demands of the course	The academic nature of the course	4
	The 'leap' from previous study experience into diploma/degree work	8
	A perceived lack of clear guidance/support about what was expected in coursework and/or little feedback on return of coursework	6
	Experience of failure in coursework	3
	Perceived lack of organization of lectures and tutorials	3
	Insufficient support	13
Placement issues	Experiences on placement	14

staff tend to describe this issue in terms of students making a poor and ill-informed decision, resulting in them ending up on the wrong course. Again this leaves little for the university to change, except in terms of seeking to steer such students away by the provision of better information. Students however are less likely to talk of themselves as having made the wrong choice, but

to refer to the course as not meeting their expectations. The focus is shifted from the individual student to the provision. Many of the factors offered by staff that locate the issue with individual students can be turned around to locate the issue within higher education itself. We can see students as lacking in the abilities needed for success in higher education: or we can see higher education as failing to support students in developing the abilities needed. Or, more radically, we can suggest that higher education is presuming and demanding abilities which are not appropriate to its new function as a mass provider.

Conclusion and recommendations for further research

Our analysis found teaching staff more likely than students to explain attrition in terms which problematize students. These views are reflective of the early literature, which also tended to locate attrition in factors relating to individual students' choices, circumstances or abilities. Students, on the other hand, were more likely to focus on issues relating to their experiences of the university or their placements.

The differences we found in staff and student perspectives are important insofar as staff views are likely to be a more powerful factor in influencing policy development and affecting the ground level change which most affects students. The student voice is less powerful. Thomas (2006) draws on work which sees schools as teachers' worlds in which children are temporary guests to argue more widely that policy and practice tends to be based on the assumptions of those with greater power. She suggests that students in higher education are not able to shape and change the student experience to meet their needs but must survive (or not) in a system constructed by and for others.

Thomas argues that research insights drawn from comparison of staff and student views make possible the 'triple loop learning' which 'permits insight into the nature of paradigm itself' (Isaacs, 1993, quoted in Thomas, 2006: 121). By highlighting the differences in conceptions of staff we hope to encourage a move away from approaches which seek to remedy perceived deficits in student, for example through provision of student support services or skills tutors, towards the more fundamentally transformative relational and pedagogic changes sought by students.

The emphasis of staff on factors internal to students is more likely to lead to a fatalistic pessimism about the prospects of improvement. Many of the issues identified by students, such as the lack of support generally and lack of guidance on assignments, are conceivably within the power of the university to improve and provide grounds for optimism about change. Where students

do leave for reasons which the university cannot address, our findings indicate a significant number continue with their studies elsewhere or hope to resume their education in the future. This suggests a need for the adoption of more altruistic institutional strategies which support transfer within the wider sector

It is important to stress that it has not been our intention in this article to simply shift the blame from students to teaching staff. We are as critical as Quinn et al. (2005) of a culture of blame and failure that encourages defensiveness, and a reluctance to openly examine and discuss our practice, or to seek to understand the points of view of others. As individuals, most academic staff put enormous effort and energy into trying to support students. The different perspectives of staff and students are understandable, and to some extent inevitable, in the contexts of the differing experiences and motivations of the two groups, and the different worlds they inhabit.

Our findings are limited insofar as they are derived from research into a single programme within one institution. It would be useful for this study to be followed up with a comparison between two or more universities and a range of disciplines. There is a tendency for health and social care provision to be separated from the mainstream, as a result of the different funding streams and particularities in student populations and programme provision. It would be helpful to more fully understand and map the areas of commonality in students' experiences, as well as the differences. In providing a comparison between three sets of data within the confines of a short article, we have not sub-divided our samples in terms of variables such as gender, age, social class, ethnicity or dimensions of personal experience. Particularly in the case of the data relating to the teaching staff, such deeper analysis would undoubtedly lead to interesting findings, differentiating between staff and provide more subtle layers of understanding of staff attitudes to students' early withdrawal.

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