



The New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit
Te Wahanga Tatari Kaute Tohungatanga o nga Whare Wananga o Aotearoa

Welcome to a timely contribution to the ‘retention/completion’ debate

Mantz YORKE, Bernard LONGDEN

Retention and student success in higher education

Maidenhead, UK, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University, 2004.

(see below for purchase details)

Earlier this year, the Ministry of Education in New Zealand released *The Report of the Technical Working Group: Introduction of a performance element to tertiary education funding (15 December 2003)* and called for comment. The Working Group was charged with developing proposals that included a set of performance indicators that would encourage improved educational gains by learners, and a link between performance against those indicators and the allocation of funding. The Working Party recommended performance indicators that covered Graduate Experience Questionnaire outcomes, successful course completions and course retention, and proposed benchmark percentages; institutions that did not meet those benchmarks would run the risk of losing 5% of the teaching component of government tertiary education funding.

The Working Group is careful to make the point that successful course completions and course retentions were acceptable only as *proxies* for educational gain by learners. It also warns that perverse incentives can occur with both performance funding and enrolment-based funding depending on the mix of performance indicators, and that it is crucial to ensure that quality assurance systems are sufficient to manage any adverse effects from the Performance Element.

So, the linking of performance measures of completion and retention with funding (dis)incentives is a live issue in New Zealand, and a significant number of us who work in tertiary education keep expressing concern that the use of data on retention and completion as measures of institutional performance ignores the complexity of reasons for students’ withdrawal from, and non-continuation of, programmes of study. How can we make our point more strongly? How can we come to understand the issues?

We can do no better than read Mantz Yorke and Bernard Longden’s new book *Retention and student success in higher education*. Whereas our concerns have, for the most part, been personal opinion based on observations as teachers in particular institutions, this book is research-based, reviewing the literature and theory, and examining research carried out in Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom. Most importantly, the students’ voices are clearly heard.

Here is a book that gives support to the warnings made by many about the danger of accepting data on retention and completion as hard data and absolute benchmarks. The

publication of indicators in any area is likely to have effects on what is being measured. With respect to retention and completion, environments where selection of students is possible will experience pressure to enrol students whose backgrounds point more strongly to student success; and we might add that in environments of open access – as in New Zealand – there can be pressure to lower standards to meet targets and thresholds. The usefulness of the data is not in the data itself, but in the questions that the data raises.

Yorke and Longden are willing to propose that the rationale for using retention and completion as performance indicators is weakened by government policies. Less funding by government for education and more funding by the students themselves often require students to study part-time over a longer period of time than the timeframe used to calculate completion rates; policies of greater access to education capture students who may not be so well prepared or informed or likely to possess the cultural and social capital necessary to support success; policies in support of greater access to for life-long learning can lead many students to ‘dip in and out’ of programmes.

From a study of the evidence, Yorke and Longden suggest that student departures result from a combination of factors which are unique to each student. Causes for departures may be institution-related; students may have a feeling of being let down by the institution. Causes may be student-related arising from flawed decision making about entering a particular programme of study, failure to cope with the demands of the programme, life-style choices, extraneous events, failure to adjust to a new-found freedom, and the worry of student loan debt.

Of course it is comforting to read a book that supports our concerns raised about policymakers’ focus on retention and completion rates, and that clarifies the causes for withdrawal from study. But for this book, that is just the beginning. The real value of Yorke and Longden’s book lies in its search for positive outcomes and for its insistence that we must come to know, understand and improve the quality of the student learning experience. To focus on retention is to risk mistaking the symptom for the cause. Our focus, they advise us, should not be on retention and completion. Rather, it should be on student success through teaching, learning, assessment and institutional support services. To focus on student success is to bring the students’ interest centre stage and to highlight the need to enhance the quality of the student experience.

As the book progresses, it leads towards a comprehensive discussion of a large number of things (44 in all) that can be done by the three parties involved - the institutions, the students, and the higher education system. For each party, in turn, various suggestions are made in four areas – the improvement of student decision making, the student experience, students’ abilities to cope with the demands of academic programmes, and the way students cope or do not cope with events that impact on their lives outside the institution. Among the suggestions to institutions is a fifth section with respect to academic processes – student learning culture, programme structures, teaching approaches, use of formative assessment and emphasis on the first-year experience. There are 24 suggestions for institutions, 12 suggestions for students and 8 suggestions for the higher education system; each suggestion is supported by discussion.

This book should be compulsory reading for all who have an interest in enhancing the student experience and the chances of student success – teachers, institutional administrators, policy makers, governmental advisers and politicians. *Retention and student success in higher*

education reveals something of the complexities involved in understanding the student experience; the book is a warning of the dangers of reliance on data in policy making. By concentrating on ways of providing a student learning experience that results in student success, Yorke and Longden set us achievable challenges and leave us with a strong and positive message.

John M Jennings

Director

New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit

director@aau.ac.nz

30 September 2004

Mantz YORKE, Bernard LONGDEN

Retention and student success in higher education

Maidenhead, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University, 2004.

Available in New Zealand at NZ\$72.55 (including GST) from

Customer Service

McGraw-Hill New Zealand

Private Bag 11 904

Ellerslie

Auckland 1005

(09) 526 6215

cservice_auckland@mcgraw-hill.com