
Libraries and student retention: some thoughts about the issues and an approach to evaluation



Kay Foster
Library & Information Services,
University of Teesside
Tel 01642 342126
Email: kay.foster@tees.ac.uk

THINKING ABOUT LIBRARIES AND STUDENT RETENTION

Student retention is one of the biggest concerns currently in higher education in the UK, and this concern, it must be admitted, is prompted at least partly by a funding structure that penalises universities and colleges for students who do not complete their courses. More altruistic aspects of this concern are the short and long-term effects on students who do not complete courses, for reasons related to their finances or their self-esteem, although the picture here is a complex one, and non-completion of courses is by no means always negative for the students concerned. Some UK higher education institutions already have a retention strategy, and others are at various stages of developing one. Library staff may have wondered where they and their resources fit into this scenario, and this article ponders some of the questions that arose when some time and money became available at the University of Teesside Library & Information Services (L&IS) in the autumn of 2002, for a project linking the evaluation of services to the contribution of libraries to student retention.

THE SERVICES AND LEARNING EVALUATION PROJECT

The project itself was carried forward by one part-time researcher (with a background in education, rather than as a professional librarian) and was necessarily exploratory in nature. Much of the time was devoted to tracking down relevant research and trying to conceptualise any relationship that might exist between students' experience of academic libraries/resource centres and retention. As a case study to illustrate the issues in

practice, a small, qualitative study was conducted with off-site learners on higher education modules being offered by the university in various community-based locations in the Middlesbrough area. This article concentrates on the research review and the approach to evaluation that was developed. The complete report including the case study and general bibliography is available on the University of Teesside website¹.

LOOKING FOR CLUES

The project began with a literature search, which mainly suggested that the topic consistently fell between the categories of existing research. Many published evaluations of library services were located but none mentioned retention issues. There is a growing body of research by UK educationalists into student retention (also phrased as 'completion'), but this tends to focus on students' general academic and social experience, or on department, school or faculty policies. Issues relating to libraries or use of learning resources are rarely discussed, and where they fit into the whole academic context is unclear. Some of the research found on retention did, however, suggest a link between retention and students' experience with libraries and their services, if only in a minority of cases. Whether it is possible to separate out library-related factors remains an unanswered question, given the complexity that emerged from the next stage of the project, which was a review of research on retention.

RETENTION RESEARCH: THE US PERSPECTIVE

Student retention has been the subject of considerable research in the USA since the 1970s, whereas the UK research is less in volume and more recent. The work of Vincent Tinto has been very influential in the USA: despite criticisms, much later research on both sides of the Atlantic has drawn on its broad concepts, and this project was no exception.

Tinto² envisages the cause of non-completion of courses as a lack of integration into the social, cultural and intellectual life of the institution: the individual does not manage to fit in, or in some cases consciously comes not to wish to fit in, with the general ethos and atmosphere of a specific institution, for a whole host of reasons –academic, social, financial, institutional and personal - acting in a complex relationship to each other. Tinto believes, therefore, that institutional factors contribute to student departures. This is a major move away from much of the earlier US research on retention, where student 'drop-out' was generally attributed to deficiencies of skills

or personality on the student's part. The notion of 'integration' became very important to the thinking of the project despite a lack of clarity about its exact meaning³. 'Integration' seemed nevertheless to be a useful shorthand term for a state in which the students feel themselves to be in a supportive, productive and appropriate situation in their studies. Tinto's emphasis on the importance to retention of a good academic and social environment within an institution seems to be borne out in general by other research, including some of the major contributions to the British research.

NATIONAL RETENTION RESEARCH IN THE UK

In the late 1990s two research projects into retention were set up in the north west of England, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England⁴. The first was under the direction of Mantz Yorke of Liverpool John Moores University, and the second was led by Ozga and Sukhnandan of Keele University.

In a later expansion of his 1997 study, Yorke⁵ analysed the responses of 2151 full-time or sandwich students and 328 part-time students who had withdrawn from courses, identifying 39 factors which had contributed to their decisions to withdraw. He then grouped these factors into six categories, which placed satisfaction with library provision in the lowest of his six factor groupings for full-time and sandwich students, although for part-timers this group moved one place up in the list. He concludes, however, that 'dissatisfaction with aspects of institutional provision' remains 'of minimal importance' and 'contribute[s] little to individuals' decisions to withdraw from higher education'⁶. When asked directly for this project where he thought academic library provision fits into the whole picture, he gave as his opinion that any effect is indirect, unless the resource provision is particularly poor⁷. However, his view is that the more that library staff interact directly with students and become part of the students' experience of the ethos of the whole institution, the more direct an effect they could have. His conclusion, on the basis of his own research and that of others, is that retention is related to the students' experience of the whole institution: what matters is how much they perceive that the staff, taken as a whole, support students.

This view has occasioned some comment among library professionals at Teesside. It should be acknowledged firstly that a good quality and frequency of interaction between staff and students is not the only factor here, and secondly that staff cannot force students to use services or to interact

with them: students' willingness to engage with the demands of their studies is crucial. The aim of user education is to develop students' capabilities as independent learners: this and the trend to provide self-service facilities might be seen as reducing opportunities for students to interact with staff. If, however, interaction is interpreted more widely to encompass students' interaction with L&IS, its staff and services as a whole, then this would seem less of a concern. Responsiveness to students' needs and appropriate support at the different stages of their student careers may be the more central issues for librarians.

Ozga and Sukhnandan expanded on their more qualitative study in a later article, also concluding that non-completion must be seen as the 'result of interaction between student and institution'⁸ and considering the major factors to be student preparedness and compatibility of choice: both these factors, of course, subsume several different strands. In other words, the best predictors of completion, in their view, are a pro-active, well-informed choice of institution and course by students, obtaining a place at the preferred institution on the preferred course, and an experience of the course and institution that is a reasonable match to their expectations. In their sample, it seemed that factors such as finance, relations with staff, accommodation and general social experience in the institution played a lesser role compared to these concerns. However, their study identified important differences between the behaviour of mature students and younger school leavers, also echoed in Yorke's study, where he comments that older students were more likely to cite finance and family and work commitments as major reasons for leaving, while younger students (the under 25s) were more likely to be disenchanted with their courses and university life in general.

Finally, if 'match to expectations' is as important a factor as both Yorke and Ozga and Sukhnandan suggest, it is interesting to look at a survey using a facilities management approach⁹. Price and his colleagues targeted a range of UK universities to discover how students ranked various factors to do with university facilities in their initial choice of university. This survey ranked 'quality of library facilities' as third in both years, after 'had the course you wanted' and 'availability of computers', the latter being also a factor in which library/resource centre facilities are implicated. 'Availability of quiet areas e.g. library, study rooms' ranked at number 5, adding to the impression that library and computer facilities (which seem to

be strongly linked in students' minds) may be a significant factor in choosing where to study.

SPECIFIC PROBLEMS WITH LIBRARIES

Scattered through the UK retention literature were small comments on students' experience of library facilities. McGivney, for example, cites research from Liverpool John Moores University which suggested that 'the standard of facilities, particularly library, computing, study and social facilities, contributed to decisions to withdraw'¹⁰.

This is somewhat echoed by a report from the National Audit Office¹¹, where the qualitative data included complaints from students that financial problems were aggravated by having to buy books because there were insufficient copies in the library, and by the cost of printing out assignments. At a more general level, this report also suggests that part of the problem for some students is the mismatch between the structured and supported nature of learning in schools compared to the increasing expectation in higher education that students will have the skills to learn independently. It is possible that there is some indirect connection here with use of learning resources, and with information literacy.

Cullen¹² addresses some library-related issues in connection with access students (i.e. mature students without normal entrance qualifications taking courses at further education colleges to prepare themselves for higher education). In her study, reasons for withdrawal from courses run by the University of Edinburgh included lack of availability of relevant textbooks in the library, compounded by lack of time to use the library, and lack of funds to compensate for this by buying books. Only 16 students were surveyed for this small study, but it is interesting to note that she cites moves to give access students a named contact on the library staff, and provide more copies of the essential texts, as having had an (unquantified) effect on retention rates.

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE FROM THE RESEARCH?

The problem of falling between the two research areas of library service evaluation and student retention is arguably a very real one, as is a lack of clarity about how researchers conceptualise use of learning resources. If research is conducted on the assumption that a library/LRC is a 'facility' comparable to a sports centre, then it is hardly surprising if that research concludes that libraries rarely have much impact on student retention in either direction. If researchers took the view that using learning resources is an integral part

of the experience of learning, then the picture might change considerably, with potentially library-related issues appearing in the first rank of importance. The problems that remain are a lack of understanding about how the use of resources interacts with other factors involved in learning, and about how students perceive and experience libraries and their services.

EVALUATING WITH RETENTION IN MIND

Overall the research review and consideration of the many and complex issues involved in student retention seem to suggest a link of some sort between libraries and retention. An approach to evaluation of services had to be developed in the light of this. Tinto identifies the importance of focusing lesson retaining students, than on improving their whole experience of the institution and 'reducing the barriers in the way of persistence'¹³, and this complements Hull's research¹⁴ on barriers to library access, which offers resources in identifying likely barriers. An evaluative approach was considered that involved identifying, in a specific context, for a specific service, all the barriers that might exist, so that they could be addressed as far as possible. In a situation where precise measurement was unlikely, this provided some sort of guiding principle, but on the other hand this approach might be seen by some as passive, in that removing those barriers within institutional control and resource constraints may still not be enough to bring some students in to interact with and experience the services provided for them. Some of the existing L&IS activity that can be envisaged as retention-oriented, e.g. induction, user education, skills support and collaboration with local colleges, community centres and public libraries, is inherently more pro-active, and a wide range of this type of activity is already undertaken at Teesside. Among many other considerations, there are resource and staffing constraints here.

What was finally suggested, therefore, was that in order to maximise its potential contribution to student retention, evaluation should focus on student experience. This involves evaluating the impact of activities on all categories and types of students, rather than their impact on the 'average' or 'typical' student. Such an approach is necessarily largely qualitative. The traditional statistical surveys of user satisfaction offer much useful information, but if retention is the focus of the enquiry then it is really necessary to explore more deeply the reasons for dissatisfaction— while recognising that one cannot please all of the people all of the time. This approach is an extension of the trend in

the profession to become more customer-oriented, but seeing this trend as part of a retention strategy, rather than simply desirable in itself, gives the issue even greater weight. This approach also reflects all three of Tinto's guiding principles for institutional retention strategies: putting students' interests first; committing to the retention of all groups of students; and the building of 'supportive social and educational communities'¹⁵.

THE CASE STUDY

As a first attempt to put this approach into practice, it was decided to evaluate a recent L&IS scheme for supporting students on higher education level courses who were studying at various community locations. This is described in more detail in the report, but a few points are worth making here.

The students on these courses were not a homogeneous group. Some of them were aiming to get degrees, some were definitely not, and others were seeing how things went before making up their minds. Their experiences of using (or not using) the LRC or local collaborative schemes with public libraries were also very variable. This makes it very difficult to standardise support. A sensitive and flexible approach to support is needed which can be adapted as necessary to meet the needs of specific groups, in collaboration with the tutor as appropriate, once contact has been made and the position established.

Some of the problems the community learners expressed are outside L&IS control and unlikely to change: for example the size of the building, the classification system, the general profile of its customers, its location and problems with parking. A very specific problem for these learners is the short timescale of individual off-site courses: faced with trying to understand and use a large and complex system for a course that lasts 10-12 weeks, they are going to need help from staff.

For groups such as these community learners, who may have very little interaction with other areas of the university, entering the LRC may be their first experience of the university as an institution. If that is the case, then the impressions they receive are important to their sense of 'integration' (in Tinto's term) or 'belonging' (in their own term). Given that some of the community learning students seemed to feel uncertain of their entitlement to be in the building and vulnerable about asking for help, how staff interact with them is also important. There may well be problems here with the assumptions that staff make about what

students 'usually' already know (a 'barrier' identified by Hull¹⁶): after all, these community learners are indistinguishable from other mature students to staff on the other side of the enquiry desk.

THE WAY AHEAD

These learners need to be supported with sensitivity, and there is a danger of patronising them or subjecting them to repeated induction programmes as they move from course to course. Since the first report was written, work has continued. There have been problems with recruitment for community learning courses, but those that have run have been visited by L&IS staff at an early session to introduce the services available, and a few weeks later to check if any problems have arisen. Specific user education has been put on to meet students' identified needs, and staff in L&IS feel they are beginning to understand the needs and the diversity in this group of students.

Since completing the first phase of the project, the target group has been expanded to include access students at the local colleges, and at the time of writing this work is still going on. L&IS is in a position to be the ambassador to these groups of students for the rest of the university. Many of the off-site students eventually become on-site ones, so that understanding their needs and experiences is an important aspect of both recruitment and retention, in which L&IS is keen to play its full part.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project was funded by the Learning and Teaching Innovation Fund, the Widening Participation Innovation Fund and Transition Bid Funding at the University of Teesside. The community learning modules were funded by the Progression Pathways Project in the Tees Valley.

REFERENCES

- 1 <http://www.tees.ac.uk/lis/researchkf.cfm>
- 2 V. Tinto, *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*, 2nd ed, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993
- 3 J. Ozga and L. Sukhnandan, 'Undergraduate non-completion: developing an explanatory model' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 52, (3), 1998, pp 316-333
- 4 Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Undergraduate non-completion in*

higher education in England, London: HEFCE
Research Series 97/29, 1997

- 5 M. Yorke, *Leaving early: undergraduate non-completion in higher education*, London: Falmer Press, 1999
- 6 Yorke, 1999, p 62
- 7 Personal communication from M. Yorke, 15 Nov 2002
- 8 Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998, p 316
- 9 I. Price, F. Matzdorf, L. Smith and H. Agahi, *The impact of facilities on student choice of university*, Sheffield: Higher Education FM (Facilities Management) Forum, Facilities Management Graduate Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, 2002
- 10 V. McGivney, *Staying or leaving the course*, Leicester: NIACE, 1996, p 128
- 11 National Audit Office, *Improving student achievement in English higher education*, London: HMSO, 2002
- 12 M-A. Cullen, *Weighing it up: a case study of discontinuing Access students*, University of Edinburgh, Centre for Continuing Education, Occasional Paper Series No. 2, 1994
- 13 Tinto, 1993, p 188
- 14 B. Hull, *Barriers to libraries as agents of lifelong learning*. London: Library and Information Commission Report, 2000
- 15 Tinto, 1993, p 147
- 16 B. Hull, 'Can librarians help to overcome the social barriers to access?' in L. Ashcroft, ed., *Continuity, culture, competition – the future of library and information studies education; proceedings of the 4th British Nordic Conference on Library and Information Studies, 21-23 March 2001, Dublin, Ireland*, Bradford: MCB University Press, 2002