

ATTRACTION, RETENTION AND SUPPORT PROJECT

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

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In May 2001 the department of History and Economic History at Manchester Metropolitan University volunteered to take part in an Attraction, Retention and Support Project within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. Despite significant changes to its Year One skills provision and an overhaul of its personal tutor system in previous years, the department had seen drop-out rates on Year One of its BA programme rise to just over 20% by 2002/01. By participating in a trial project, therefore, the department hoped to improve its support and retention of students from a wide variety of backgrounds and with very diverse entry qualifications. The following piece describes the department's early response to an initial survey in the project before outlining key areas that require further development and have informed the department's continuing efforts.

The project was based on a preliminary report of August 2001, which used a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to survey current support and retention procedures across the Faculty. The aim was to make a limited number of practical recommendations which could be implemented on a trial basis on Year One of two degree programmes: BA History and BA Criminology and Sociology. Some of these recommendations were made on the basis of existing good practice in the Faculty, whilst others drew on work done elsewhere.

The report recommendations focused on four key areas:

- Induction week
- The Personal Tutor system
- Monitoring of attendance and follow-up
- Monitoring of coursework submission and follow-up

In addition, it proposed detailed monitoring of student responses to the changes in the form of face-to-face interviews and progress questionnaires.

Induction Week

The report made three recommendations for Induction Week: that Personal Tutors should be introduced to their student group during this first week; that they should accompany students on their introductory visits to the library and computer facilities; and that attendance should be monitored carefully and followed up where necessary, because the evidence suggested that poor attendance at this early stage was a likely indicator of future problems.

The History department had already overhauled its induction procedures to ensure that Personal Tutors met their students group during induction week. In the wake of the recommendations, however, it increased these contacts to include library and computing visits and introduced detailed attendance registers with procedures for contacting absentees.

Personal Tutor systems

The preliminary report emphasised the importance to students of an effective Personal Tutor system that would provide regular meetings throughout the academic year, and would give tutors the information they needed to direct students to additional sources of assistance.

In fact, the History department had already overhauled its Personal Tutor system in the years before the project. In order to provide regular contacts between first years and their tutors, it had incorporated the Personal Tutor system into its core Year One unit, *The Rise of Persecuting Society*, enabling seminar tutors to act as Personal Tutors for the group or groups of students allocated to them. The unit, which is double-weighted with four hours of seminar and tutorial hours each week, provides the bulk of the specialist skills work in Year One as well as an element of Personal Development Planning.

This structure, which has proved popular with students and staff, was retained, but with amendments based on the recommendations of the report. Personal Tutors are now provided with an information pack with the details of additional sources of help for students with personal, financial, employment, childcare and other problems. New structures also provide them with up-to-date information about the attendance record and coursework submission rates of their students across the entire degree programme.

Attendance

The link between poor attendance and failure to progress, well documented in other surveys, was confirmed by the statistical findings of the Faculty preliminary survey. In response to its recommendations, the department therefore tightened its procedures for taking registers in all classes and for contacting persistent non-attenders. Although seminar tutors are responsible for contacting students who are absent from their units, the Year One tutor and Course Leader now have responsibility for surveying attendance across the programme and identifying potential problems. These are discussed at departmental boards during the year so that action can be taken where necessary.

Coursework

The preliminary report highlighted coursework as a particular cause of concern to both staff and students. Across the Faculty, coursework submission rates were falling. This was sometimes caused by poor time management on the part of students, but was also exacerbated by a tendency to bunch of assignment deadlines at Christmas and Easter (when student withdrawals also peaked). Interviews and questionnaires revealed that some students felt that they had not been properly prepared for early assignments, whilst others commented that feedback occasionally too slow and sparse to be of assistance.

Before the project began, the History department had changed its Year One coursework in order to incorporate a range of diagnostic and skills-based assignments.

These ran unchanged in academic year 2002/03, but were accompanied by several new initiatives in response to the report. We now distribute a detailed assignment schedule to students at the start of the academic year, encouraging them to manage their time more effectively. Coursework submission dates have been changed where necessary in order to spread the load more evenly throughout the academic year and to avoid overloading students with deadlines at Christmas and Easter. Some effort has been made to improve the preparation of students for early assignments by setting aside time in seminars for detailed discussions. Tutors are also asked to explain how feedback will be given and how the marking criteria will operate. They are also asked to complete the marking process promptly and to set aside time for detailed and constructive feedback - in writing on the feedback sheet, and face-to-face during seminar and tutorial time.

Summary

In general the changes appear to have had a positive impact. During academic year 2002/03 withdrawal rates dropped to approximately 15% (although other factors may also have been involved), and responses to student questionnaires showed that induction weeks and the Personal Tutor system were considered to be working well. Better monitoring of student attendance and coursework submission rates has undoubtedly helped staff to identify students with problems and to offer guidance at an earlier stage.

There remain, of course, problems. Coursework continues to be a source of debate – its content, the number of assignments set, the continuing high level of non-submission. Even the bunching of submission deadlines, though reduced, has not been entirely eliminated. Perhaps most significantly – and perhaps partly as a result of our work with Year One students, we have seen a rise in drop-out rates among Year Two students over the last three years. At the very least, this suggests that better support and retention strategies in Year One will be irrelevant unless they are also extended throughout the degree. The department intends to address this problem by improving its personal tutor provision in Years Two and Three as part of a new Personal Development Planning scheme.

Overall, the project has encouraged the department to examine and improve its procedures. Perhaps most positively, it has promoted the sharing of ideas and good practice with colleagues from other departments in the Faculty. This has been recognised by the establishment of a permanent Faculty working group on support and retention containing representatives from all departments, and of a regular programme of staff development sessions on retention issues.

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