

WORKSHOP REPORT

What should you know about your students?

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Background

Student experience, retention and progression are key issues for us at MMU. The focus of this workshop was to consider the information that we think should be available about our students in order for staff to target resources and guide actions that will support students better. We explored what information is available already, what else was needed, and how it might be managed. The notion of 'at risk' groups was discussed and the possibility of predicting withdrawal using key metrics considered, drawing on examples from other institutions. Participants also shared experiences and considered hypothetical scenarios for best practice.

Available information

There is a great deal of information routinely acquired, examples include:

- National Student Survey (NSS) - satisfaction; metrics and comments.

- Staff-Student Liaison meetings - student reps reporting to Programme teams.
- Continuous Monitoring and Improvement (CMI) - routine unit evaluations, external examiner reports.
- Student Support Officers - informal dialogue between Faculty SSOs and students.
- Attendance monitoring – blanket, selective, online.
- Assessment – submission, attainment.
- Student information – prior qualifications, demographic data, personal information, vulnerable groups (such as care leavers).

Confidentiality and sensitivity was considered key to the use of these metrics

‘At risk’ groups?

It was considered that there are many factors that could potentially be used based on **information that is available at the start** of courses/units. Also, there is much generic information and theory about risks attached with certain groups from the published literature (e.g. part time, distance learners, disability, international, clearing entrants etc.). However, **some data is emergent** (e.g. non-attenders, non-submitters, failing assessments, changing personal circumstances).

Solutions

The literature provides much useful advice but the skill is in tailoring learning from experiences elsewhere to our students - at whatever scale. There is also a balance to be had between treating students as customers and as learners – and the balance may shift under differing circumstances. General examples of student support included:

- Problem solving/support – academic, support staff, peer-peer (e.g. mentoring F2F, mentoring online), student-staff meetings/events.
- Socialisation – F2F, online, behavioural (e.g. say ‘hello’ and know students’ names).
- Self help – information availability and ease of access.
- Use of statistical evidence (e.g. Heisserer and Parette 2002).

Priorities

Several priorities for obtaining and using information our students were identified:

- Retain existing processes that work at a local level.
- Consider the use of indicators in a supportive manner with full agreement around sensitivity and confidentiality.
- Provide perceived high risk students with bespoke support, particularly at the start of courses.
- Generate and interrogate automated lists of students not submitting, not engaging, failing assessments, and not attending.
- Bespoke actions may involve support classes/groups (e.g. SSO led), meetings with students, information, dialogue/connectivity (e.g. email, online groups with student mentors), assessment 'surgeries' (e.g. problem unit; not 'deficiency model' to staff).

Workshop Conclusions

- There is already good, local practice using information to support our students, but also the possibility that we unfairly label our students - and we need to acknowledge this balance.
- With the right philosophy towards the management of our data there is potential to better use metrics/data and we should continue to explore the potential of information we already have available.
- Any information harvested should be used sensitively and confidentially to support, and not highlight deficiencies.
- Care needs to be taken to avoid 'saturation' of information (particularly qualitative comments – there is a lot available already) and decide upon key aspects in the light of all the information that could be available.

Literature referred to (with abstracts)

Heisserer, D. and Parette, P. 2002. [Advising at-risk students in college and university settings](#). *College Student Journal* 36, 69-84.

The importance of intrusive advising at-risk college and university students (i.e., students who: are ethnic minorities, are academically disadvantaged, have disabilities, are of low socioeconomic status, and are probationary students) has been repeatedly emphasized in the professional literature. Intrusive advising strategies are typically used with at-risk students, and are special techniques based on prescriptive, developmental, and integrated

advising models. Numerous benefits to using intrusive advising are noted, along with examples of strategies used with five at-risk groups.

Murtaugh, P. A., Burns L. D., and Schuster, J. 1999. Predicting the retention of university students. *Research in Higher Education* 40(3), 355-371.

Survival analysis was used to model the retention of 8,867 undergraduate students at Oregon State University between 1991 and 1996. Attrition was found to increase with age, and decrease with increasing high school GPA and first-quarter GPA. Non-residents had higher attrition rates than did resident and international students, and students taking the Freshman Orientation Course appeared to be at reduced risk of dropping out. Statistically significant associations of retention with ethnicity/race and college at first enrollment were also noted.