Student Retention and Reasons for Withdrawal

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In an earlier study (Prescott and Simpson, 2002 – being refereed) we have proposed a hierarchy of needs related to retention and motivation. The premise is that basic 'housekeeping' factors need to be addressed in order to retain students. These negative factors may appear obvious and it is probable that many students adapt and cope with such shortcomings (e.g. poor or incomplete information, lack of clear guidance, timetable clashes etc.). However, some students adapting to higher education find these bewildering and are unable to compensate, and their coping mechanism is to avoid attending and withdraw. This may be aggravated when away from home and a supportive peer group. An institution needs to address these basic needs to improve retention, before it can begin to address the higher needs of learning motivation.

It is assumed that our students have an inherent motivation to learn, even though this may not be an altruistic motive. Whilst some students enjoy learning (intellect driven), for many more it is a means to an end (vocational driven), and to some it may be more a survival strategy (fear of failure, fear of unemployment, parental pressure). An institution needs to reinforce these learning motivators by complimentary strategies, and we have considered factors affecting this such as social belonging, ego status and self-fulfilment. An institution can develop strategies to provide these positive drivers for motivation, which take a student beyond mere retention to achievement.

However, it has to be recognised that not all withdrawals at the University of Abertay are during year 1 and our current work is also reviewing historical data to identify why students who have, in the first instance, got

past the initial layers of retention factors and then become demotivated and return to that regime. Within our own institution we have had a period of relative stability from September 1999 to September 2002 and an apparently consistent strategy that applies to all 4 schools. However, it is now evident that the practical application of the strategy may have varied due to resourcing (some strategies are time intensive) and due to staff perceptions. We are therefore comparing data from the 4 schools over this 3 year period.

The university withdrawal form has a large number of options (17) in order to try to cover every possible cause for a student withdrawal and this in itself can be unhelpful. It is readily apparent that staff in the different schools interpret these criteria differently when it comes to choosing the one factor to describe a cause of withdrawal, since the student's circumstances may cover more than one issue. This in turn will produce difficulties in analysing the statistical data. For example, a student who only attends a few hours early in the year may be 'non-attendance', 'poor attendance', or 'written-off'. Similarly one Programme Tutor may write 'unsuited to course' whilst another may indicate 'change of career' for an identical set of circumstances. Frequently factors are complex and the staff member completing the forms may be unsure whether poor attendance is cause or effect, and may not be fully aware of confidential personal circumstances, particularly in our 'data protection conscious' society.

For analysis purposes we have subdivided these 17 criteria into 5 main categories:

Positive -	employment, transfer of institution or change of career (i.e. we have helped the student recognise what they should be doing).
Neutral -	personal factors that are out-with our control such as a student's health, financial status, or family circumstances (note that we can give support and flexibility but we cannot resolve the root issue).
Mildy Negative -	for a variety of reasons students under-perform but there is potential for redemption. Poor performance may be improved; a student may transfer course or take a year out, or the factor may be uncertain ('unknown' and 'other'). Generally these are going to be related to the physiological needs and the security needs in the retention motivation pyramid.
Negative -	these are attendance related. Often there are other underlying factors, but if a student does not attend it is very difficult for us to help them.

Failure -   it is difficult to admit failure, but sadly there are a small number of cases
                                   where students irredeemably fail, or need to be excluded.

Simply looking at the number of withdrawals is therefore a misleading reflection on the institution, or a school: as we go down this hierarchy we have less and less chance to influence the outcome. In order to try and take this into consideration we are looking at two ways of comparing the data. Firstly a radar plot will indicate the distribution of causes and can help visually to compare schools, courses, etc. Secondly, we are trying to develop a weighting scheme to allow withdrawal reasons to be compared, so that a student who is offered employment and takes it is not seen statistically as being equal to a student who has to be excluded. This work is ongoing and will be reported on completion.