

Using evidence to explore retention and progression: Key discussion topics



Enhancement Themes

The Enhancement Themes are a programme of activity involving the whole higher education sector in Scotland. The Themes aim to improve the student learning experience. They involve institutions, staff and students, working collaboratively to share practice and generate new ideas for learning and teaching to improve strategy, policy and practice.

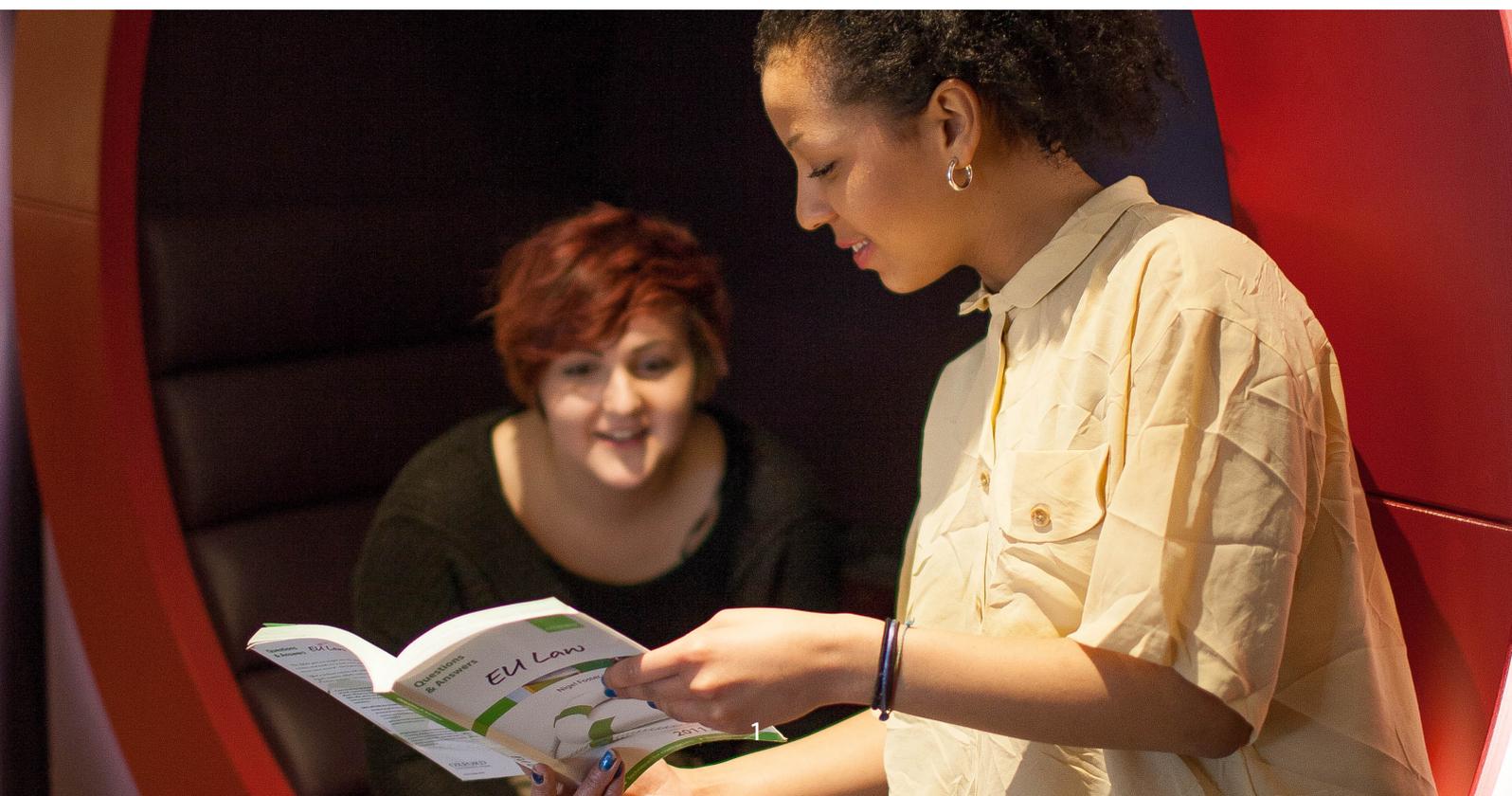
The **Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience** Enhancement Theme asks individuals, groups and institutions to examine how different forms of evidence can be better generated, interpreted, shared and applied to improve learning, teaching and the student experience of higher education.

This resource outlines the key findings and provides a series of key discussion areas emerging from a project focused on student retention and progression undertaken as part of the Theme. The aim of our project was to inform future work to help institutions consider ways to design, develop and evaluate effectively interventions to improve student retention and progression.

Context

Key points on retention and progression in the Scottish higher education sector:

- Student retention is a core metric of success.
- Systematic collection and monitoring of retention data takes place across the Scottish sector.
- While the metrics of retention are important, when institutions consider retention they think about a range of matters relating to the student experience as well as student performance as recorded by progression and retention. Institutions are concerned with delivering a great student experience.
- There are wide variations in retention rates by protected characteristics, between institutions and between disciplines within institutions.



Key project findings

- The standard definition of retention in terms of progression from first year to second year has limited use for part-time study or flexible programmes. There is a challenge to find better and more widely recognised metrics to account for student progression and success in these contexts. For example, The Open University in Scotland uses a different definition of retention to capture performance of its wholly part-time student population.
- Limited functionality and compatibility between different data sources and systems, such as student records, customer relationship management and virtual learning environments can be a challenge in making the most effective use of data.
- There is widespread interest in the use of learning analytics and big data with active discussion around ethical challenges, purposes and practice. However, only a small number of higher education institutions are currently using learning analytics to support retention initiatives.
- International literature suggests that learning analytics should work hand-in-hand with pedagogical research. While there are high levels of student retention-focused activity across the sector, relatively little of it is reflected in the published research and scholarship. A scarcity of published work is counterproductive to our efforts to advance practice, policy and strategy.
- Understanding the complex, multi-factorial nature of retention is challenging. There is scope for sharing expertise on these difficult evaluative questions across the sector. The project proposed the establishment of an annual retention forum.
- The project proposed sector collaboration on professional development for academic staff in the use of data and evidence in retention interventions. Other outcomes from the Enhancement Theme are aimed at supporting the upskilling of staff, such as the HE Data Landscape resource and Enhancing Programme Leadership collaborative cluster.

Who could use this booklet?

This booklet is aimed at staff and students working to enhance student retention and progression practices. It has been designed to stimulate discussion around three key areas of reflection arising from the research. The sequence of these areas of reflection is designed to encourage consideration in a logical order. First, consideration of supporting and coordinating structures and process; second, identifying different types of evidence and their use; and finally, examining how these first two areas influence practice in learning and teaching.



Coordinating institutional knowledge



Diversifying data and evidence



Teaching for retention

Use the suggested resources to find out more information on specific topics.



Key area for discussion: Coordinating institutional knowledge

How can you develop deeper, **more comprehensive institutional knowledge of retention projects and initiatives** and form an overarching **institutional perspective on what works**?

Questions for discussion:

- Do you have a committee or working group tasked with coordinating retention activities running across departments and schools? How does this gather and share information?
- Does your institution have a shared definition of retention and progression? How is this communicated across your institution? Are there contexts that require a different approach?
- How do you encourage and facilitate the sharing of practice and knowledge across your institution? What scope would there be to develop an open repository for sharing the details of retention-focused projects across your institution?
- What opportunities are there for staff in different parts of your institution to collaborate across boundaries, as well as share insights on and discuss issues with the integration and interpretation of retention data?
- What guidance and support are offered to staff and students to help them produce and/or collect detailed case studies on the design and evaluation of retention projects?
- How are staff encouraged to engage with research and scholarship around current retention debates? Are staff and students supported to participate in external conferences to enhance their expertise in retention? How are your researchers working in education and widening access, and practice-focused staff encouraged to collaborate to develop your retention activities?
- To what extent do you support the development of longitudinal approaches to retention data interrogation and project/intervention design? How could different approaches support, deepen and extend institutional expertise?

Resources



SEARCH: QAA Scotland Student Transitions Map for case studies featuring retention and progression: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/completed-enhancement-themes/student-transitions/transitions-map



SEARCH: Strathprints institutional repository - a digital open archive of University of Strathclyde research output: <https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk>



Key area for discussion: Diversifying data and evidence

In many cases it appears that there is **greater emphasis and value placed on quantitative data than on qualitative data.**

Questions for discussion:

- What value is placed on qualitative data by your institution? How do you know your institution places value on qualitative data? What could be done to reassure colleagues (inside and outside the institution) that such data and evidence can and should be used to a greater degree to shed light on issues, shape practice and direct policy?
- To what extent do you attempt to 'get behind' and 'go beyond' the numbers in your approach to using data and evidence in your retention work?
- What data sets/kinds of qualitative data do staff have access to in designing, implementing, and evaluating retention-focused activities?
- How do you use qualitative data to deepen your understanding of quantitative retention data?
- How do you support staff to develop their evaluation and data interpretation skills? This might involve a range of staff involved in retention practice such as data specialists, retention specialists, student services and teaching staff? What support is available to help staff extend their expertise in qualitative and mixed-method approaches?
- What measures could be taken to support staff to use, as wide a range as possible, of different sources of evidence, indicators of success, and outcomes in evaluating progression and retention interventions?

Resources



READ: Prinsloo, P. et al (2015) Big(ger) data as better data in open distance learning, *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 16(1): 284 -305: A descriptive case study of the current state of student data at the University of South Africa. The article explores the impact of existing data sources and analytic approaches and concludes by presenting a number of theses as the basis for the imperative to optimise the harvesting, analysis and use of student data.
www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1948



READ: Scottish Funding Council Agreements highlight the varied practice and approaches to enhancing retention and progression in the Scottish higher education sector. Outcome Agreements set out what universities plan to deliver in return for their funding from the SFC. You can review your own institution's Agreement and explore what activities around student retention your institution, and others across the sector, are engaged in.
www.sfc.ac.uk/funding/outcome-agreements/outcome-agreements.aspx



READ: Analysing Qualitative Data - A Guide for University and College Practitioners. Advance HE presents a short guide to analysing qualitative data, such as focus group transcripts or free-text survey responses. The guide is mindful of what is practical with limited resources and competing commitments and discusses methods to demonstrate the success or failure of an initiative, report on progress or help make sense of a problem. This briefing is of particular relevance to practitioners working on small-to medium-scale research projects in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion, teaching and learning, and governance, leadership and management.
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/analysing-qualitative-data/



Key area for discussion: Teaching for retention

Institutions face a challenge in **joining up diverse retention-focused initiatives and wealth of related data** with **teaching practice and pedagogy** across the institution. How does **what you know about retention** in your institution **inform your approach to learning and teaching**?

Questions for discussion:

- To what extent do you support and enable staff working on retention activities, such as project officers, to share their work with teaching and academic development staff in ways that could influence teaching practice and pedagogy?
- Do you have a shared idea or concept of ‘retention pedagogy’ in your institution? What would this look like, and where might it be developed in your institution?
- How could retention data and evidence, and other insights developed from retention activities be used in taught educational development programmes?
- How might you open up these programmes to broader groups of staff to include those supporting retention, enhancement and widening access activity?
- How do you facilitate effective dialogue between those whose expertise is in data, practice or pedagogy so that each benefits from a better understanding of the complexity and significance of their respective skills and expertise?

Resources



READ: See the matrix model proposed in the full research report (figure 3) to discuss the position of your own retention and progression practice:

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/student-engagement-and-demographics/retention-and-progression



READ: Find out more information on non-continuation rates in the HESA UK Performance Indicators Guide, part of QAA Scotland’s HE Data Landscape resource:

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/current-enhancement-theme/defining-and-capturing-evidence/data-landscape-resource



READ: Explore practice beyond the UK in Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017) – *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*. The report includes 18 recommendations for the Australian sector. It emphasises the importance of shared definitions and the publication of data. Recommendation 5 is concerned with evidence-based practice.

www.docs.education.gov.au/node/50816

Read: **Using evidence to explore retention and progression:**
Key areas for discussion in full at www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk



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