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Student Attainment at St Mary's University College Twickenham: Summary and Recommendations for Senior Staff

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Overview

The aim of this report is to present the findings of the project into student attainment at St Mary's University College, Twickenham, identifying both examples of best practice and recommendations for improvement. The research underpinning this was carried out between February and August 2012 and encompassed:

- A review of academic literature and research projects conducted in other institutions.
- An analysis of St Mary's University College Registry data relating to attainment between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012.
- An analysis of student responses to the question in the National Student Survey 2011, *'Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight?'*
- The development, dissemination and analysis of the Student Experience, Attainment and Retention Survey 2012, which received 146 responses.
- Indepth examination of issues related to attainment, equalities and diversities and value added measurements.
- Interviews with 1 senior staff, 5 members of academic staff and, 6 student services staff members.

This summary concentrates on institutional level recommendations. For further details of the research findings, including data related to the academic Schools, please refer to the final report (McLaren, 2012).

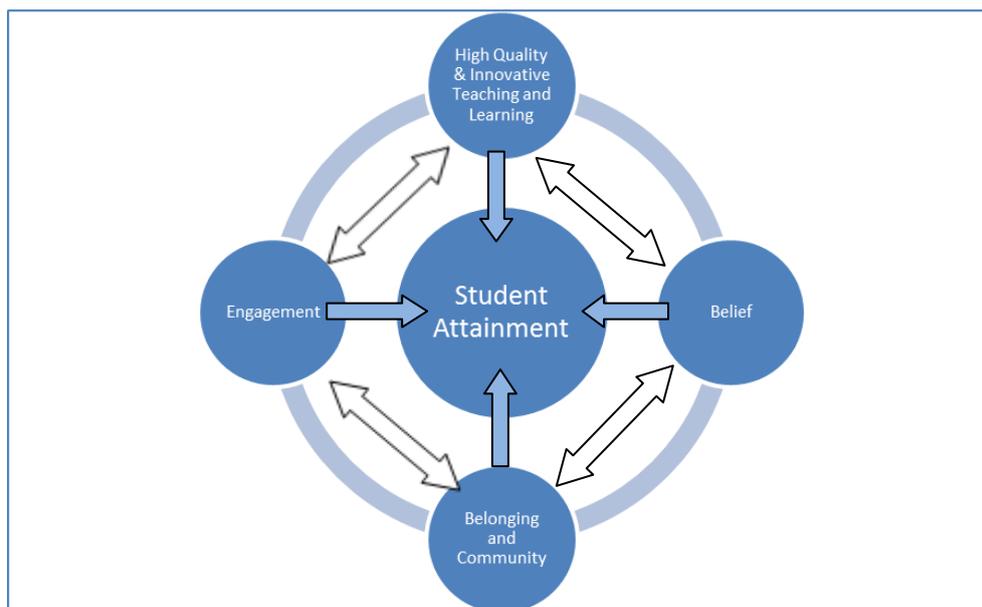
Theoretical Background

A review of a range of literature and research on retention and success was conducted (Callender, 2008; Clouder & Adefila, 2011a, 2011b; Cowden & Singh, 2012; Fairclough, 2012; Higher Education Academy/Equality Challenge Unit, 2008; Hunt, Lincoln & Walker, 2004; Lawrence, Ashford & Dent, 2008; National Union of Students (NUS) 2011; Pedagogic Quality, 2011; Richardson & Woodley, 2003; Rhodes & Neville, 2004; Prior & Fitzgibbon, 2009, 2012; Stefani, 1998; Steventon, 2012; Stokes, 2012; Thomas, 2012a, 2012b; Tinto, 1993, 2012).

The findings from these studies were amalgamated to construct the model below. The model captures the four principal elements – or cornerstones – of student attainment and how they

feed into each other. High quality and innovative teaching and learning is obviously crucial to student success (Pedagogic Quality, 2011) but it is also greatly influenced by the other three cornerstones. Belief encompasses not just the belief and confidence that students have in themselves, but also how academic and university staff regard them and mutual expectations. Student and staff belief, in turn, affects the extent to which positive staff-student and peer relationships are able to form and how much a part of the university community the students are able to feel themselves to be. Feeling isolated from the university can have a negative affect on student attainment if they begin to think that the institution is ‘not for them’ and fail to engage with the learning. The relationship between engagement and belonging and community also works the other way, as barriers to academic and social engagement (for example, family responsibilities, part-time working) can stop students feeling they belong fully to the student community, as well as affecting their ability to access the teaching and learning (Hunt *et al*, 2004; Callender, 2008; Thomas, 2012b).

Chart 1: The four cornerstones of student attainment



Factors of background and circumstance can impact these ‘cornerstones’ in a number of ways. Students from black and minority ethnic groups, for example, may have lower levels of academic confidence – self-belief – stemming from earlier educational experiences (NUS, 2011), age and gender may affect students’ responses to different types of assessment (Richardson and Woodley, 2003), and term-time employment may limit a student’s capacity to engage in their academic work and the social life of the institution. By being mindful of how student characteristics or circumstance may affect responses to teaching and learning, engagement, belonging and community, and belief, it should be possible to reduce these

attainment gaps whilst taking approaches to the problem which benefit the entire student – and staff – body.

Key findings and recommendations

Student attainment: variables related to background, circumstance and studies

- ***Background issues: The ethnicity and gender gap***

Attainment patterns at St Mary's reflect nation-wide trends in terms of the attainment gap between male and female students, and white students and students of other ethnicities: Proportionately more grades of 60 and above were awarded to female students than to male students, and female students were also less likely to obtain 'failing' grades of 39 and below. A large attainment gap is visible between black students and other ethnicities, and between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012 significantly more grades of 60 and above went to white students (42 percent) than other groups (Black students: 17 percent, Asian students: 23.2 percent; mixed students: 31 percent, other: 26.4 percent). All other ethnic minorities can be seen to receive a disproportionately high proportion of grades under 50, and only 0.5 per cent of grades awarded to black students since 2007 were 70 or over. Analysis of Registry data also shows that there is a very strong overlap between ethnicity and Qualifications on Entry: in 2011/12 68.4% of first year Foundation and undergraduate BME students entered St Mary's with non-A-Level qualifications.

From 2012/2013, targeted support is to be given to students from non-traditional backgrounds not only in the form of Get Set for Success, the Pre-Entry Programme, but also through School-based Learning Advisors and Programme-based peer-mentors. Although Learning Advisor support is to focus primarily on students with non-A-Level entry qualifications, the close correlation between this and ethnicity means that this can be expected to have a positive effect on the current attainment gap.

The effect of these interventions on the key performance outcomes of retention and success in these groups of students need to be closely monitored and evaluated at both School and institutional level. The pilot Get Set for Success programme proved to be a success in the short term in terms of easing the transition for the participating

new students and raising their confidence. Now momentum needs to be maintained for supporting vulnerable groups throughout the rest of their studies, and consideration needs to be given to how Get Set for Success can be developed for subsequent years.

Action also needs to be taken on an institutional policy level to explicitly link equality issues with attainment. To underline this, the Equality and Diversity Sub Committee should reconsider its structure and reintroduce some form of representation of academic staff in addition to the Universities and Colleges Union representative. The author welcomes plans mentioned in the February 2012 Equality and Diversity sub-committee meeting to establish an Equality and Diversity Forum to engage academic staff in discussion of Teaching and Learning Issues.

- ***Joint Honours Courses***

Students studying Joint courses (and in particular those whose courses span two Schools) generally attain lower grades than those studying towards Single Honours degrees: An analysis of weighted average grades received by students between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012 found that 33.4% of grades awarded to students on Joint programmes were 60 or higher compared to 40.6% of those studying on Single Honours Programmes.

Better monitoring of students on Joint Honours programmes is needed, together with closer coordination between the Programmes and Schools running the Joint courses to ensure these students don't slip through the 'gaps' between the different Programmes. This is another issue which could be tackled through monitoring and reporting both at School and institutional level. The appointment of Learning Advisors also represents a real opportunity to tackle the issue of joint honours attainment head on, and it is recommended that the support of joint honours students should be put high on the Learning Advisor' agenda.

Belief:

- ***Expectations***

The mismatch of expectations can be a key cause of student dissatisfaction and failure to achieve what they are capable of, and was a key issue mentioned as a barrier to attainment in a number of interviews with academic staff.

Teaching staff should make expectations clear at the outset of a module, both in terms of what they expect from their students and what their students should expect from them. This conversation should cover issues such as the amount of study required outside teaching times, attendance, submission policies, office hour availability and when students can expect replies to e-mails.

The St Mary's Student Charter should be regularly revised and updated by a joint committee of staff and students, with all parties having equal ownership of the document.

- ***Staff belief in students***

There can be a tendency towards a 'deficit' model view of student failure, which concentrates on negative character traits such as an unwillingness to put adequate hours into their studies or an unsuitability for higher education in the first place. This viewpoint, if exaggerated, can block innovative ways of thinking to increase attainment amongst underrepresented students,

There is a need to shift away from the 'deficit' model of attainment, which views problems as stemming from the students themselves and their attitudes, towards a model which looks at removing barriers to learning and developing students' strengths.

High Quality and Innovative Teaching and Learning

- ***Study Skills***

Although the profile and student awareness of the Skills Shop have grown in recent years, the Student Experience, Attainment and Retention Survey 2012 revealed that 36 percent of respondents were unaware of the service.

More work should be done to ensure that all students know the support they can access through the Skills Shop. In Modules/Programmes where it is noted that many students have problems with a particular aspect of study skills, this should be embedded into the course.

- ***Use of technology (including simmsCAPital, phone apps and social networking)***

The introduction of simmsCAPital has so far proved a success, with 85% of respondents of the Student Experience, Attainment and Retention Survey rating the platform 'good' or 'very good'. Action Research projects carried out as part of the Disparities in Student Attainment (DiSA: 2012) project have shown that encouraging alternative forms of learning (for example, carrying out group work over blogs and submitting assignments over podcasts) can have very positive effects on student engagement. Academic staff have experimented with a number of ways of using the Virtual Learning Environment, for example through uploading podcasts, working with apps and other forms of social networking, such as Programme Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.

Staff should continue to explore and increase their use of technologies in teaching and learning, catering to different learning styles, allowing communication across a number of platforms and facilitating interaction by students whilst they are not on campus.

- **Assessment**

In order to get the most out of coursework and assignments students need to have a clear picture of expectations and assessment criteria. Peer- and self-assessment have been shown to be effective methods of engaging students and increasing their understanding of the process (c.f. Stefani, 1998). At St Mary's too, staff have found that students viewing each others' work and peer-assessing folders and portfolios can act as a motivating force to improving their own work (School of Education, Interview C).

Assessment criteria and academic writing/ style guidelines should be produced for each School and standardised across modules to clarify expectations. Academic staff should increase their use of peer and self-assessment to aid students' motivation, reflective learning skills and understanding of assessment criteria.

- **Feedback**

Quality of feedback can directly affect students' chances of improving their work and going on to achieve 'good' grades. However, the National Students Survey 2011 shows that feedback is one of the principle areas of concern for students, with some complaints raised about its timeliness and usefulness. In the question, '*looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight?*' Feedback occurred as a negative aspect in 45 comments across seven subjects. Both the National Students Survey and St Mary's Student Experience, Attainment and Retention Survey 2012 exposed differences in feedback practices between different Programmes. One way to improve the flow of feedback – and ensure it reaches students – is through delivering it online. An initial pilot of the software package *GradeMark* has had overall positive feedback from staff and students (TLC 11.01.12 Minutes 03TLC11/12).

Standardised policies regarding feedback should be introduced, particularly dealing with issues such as draft submissions. For reasons of equity and workload, the author recommends making the submission of drafts prohibited across the University

College, but allowing other opportunities for reflection on assignments prior to submission, such as integrating this into peer assessment and/or group learning. This report welcomes the planned expansion of GradeMark to across the entire University College from 2012/2013, however it is suggested that St Mary's should also move towards making online feedback compulsory, to ensure that students are always able to access it, even if they are off-campus. This could be done in diverse ways – e.g. scanning hard copies of assignments marked by hand, as well as typing the feedback straight onto Word documents.

- ***Student Reviews***

This report welcomes the introduction of compulsory Student Reviews in 2012/2013. These will be twice yearly meetings to replace current Personal Development Planning meetings and formalise the process of student progress reviews. They should help student attainment and retention through increasing reflection: enabling them to be more effective in monitoring and reviewing their own progress and more aware of how they are learning and what different teaching and learning strategies are trying to achieve (for more on reflective learning and assessment see Lawrence et al, 2008; Stefani, 2008).

- ***Prizes***

The St Vincent de Paul Prize prize celebrating initiatives to enhance equality and diversity should be complimented by an award specifically targeted at projects to raise attainment. This could be an effective method of encouraging staff to consider new approaches and supporting Action Research Projects within teaching and learning focused on student success.

- **Sharing of good practice**

In terms of staff collaborative CPD, an initiative called the Learning Exchange Café has been established to allow members of staff to share ideas surrounding teaching and learning. The first session, on employability in the curriculum, was held in March 2012.

If momentum could be increased and more staff encouraged to attend, the Learning Exchange Café could spark a real atmosphere of collaborative sharing between colleagues and across different Schools, and thus a strengthening of best practice. This could be followed up by the creation of a shared repository with case studies of innovative practice from across the University College, also taking in previous winners of teaching and learning prizes and the St Vincent de Paul Prize.

Belonging and Community:

- **Student Support**

St Mary's has a very strong student support service, but should always keep an open mind to new innovations and ideas for further improvement, particularly in terms of ways to integrate student services more closely with academic support.

Ways to integrate academic and pastoral support further should be looked at. The Online Learner Support Tools used by the University of Glamorgan (encompassing 'Early Days', 'Health Check' and 'Being Successful in Your Repeat year') should be investigated as an example for how St Mary's could develop the new Simmsi database further.

- **Student Societies**

In order to promote a more inclusive student community ethos St Mary's Student Union should actively promote the establishment of a wider range of clubs and societies, particularly cultural clubs and clubs related to academic courses, so that

students who are not interested in Sports feel less marginalised. The joining fees of clubs should also be examined to ensure that costs are as low as possible and do not disadvantage students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Engagement

- ***Communication***

Communication issues are seen as a problem by some students, particularly regarding last minute changes of times and location of lectures and seminars.

It is suggested that students should be informed of changes in times or location of teaching as soon as possible, ideally 24 hours beforehand. This could be done, for example, by e-mail and/or text message.

- ***Term time employment***

Term time employment has been identified in a number of studies as having a major impact upon attainment. This does not seem to be a factor that students themselves recognise as being detrimental to their academic work: of the respondents to the Student Experience, Attainment and Retention Survey 2012, but university staff acknowledge that students' extra-university commitments can have a negative effect on their work. Recognising that undertaking paid employment is essential for many students to make ends meet and the difficulties of implementing a suggested maximum number of working hours per week, this report recommends that other measures are trialled to get the message across about the potential pitfalls of term time employment.

It is suggested that a compulsory workshop session be integrated into induction week that focuses on issues such as time-management and balancing academic and other commitments. This could be run in conjunction with the Careers Service to highlight to students the sorts of term-time work which are the least potentially disruptive to their studies. Consideration should be given to introducing guidance for recommended numbers of hours worked in employment per week during term time.

Institutional issues and data evaluation: embedding equality and attainment into institutional policy and practice

- **University Single Equality Scheme 2012-2015**

St Mary's Single Equality Scheme 2012-2015 states that 'the University College is working to ensure that it engages in inclusive practice, particularly in regard to employment and teaching and learning' and that 'equality and diversity also has to be addressed as part of the validation and revalidation of programmes and annual monitoring' (SMUC, 2012a).

These statements are to be welcomed but this report also recommends that matters of attainment should also be included and given adequate prominence in the new Scheme. The author hopes the Single Equality Scheme will remain true to its word as an 'evolving document' and will incorporate more solid references to student attainment.

- **Data evaluation**

The use of institutional data is still a problem within St Mary's and it is clear that Schools and Programmes have a range of different practices and do not all trust the accuracy of Registry data. The result of this is different levels of analysis regarding attainment take place across different Programmes.

Principal's Dashboard provides a good snapshot of the picture across the institution, but there is potential for this to become more detailed and nuanced so that it can become of real benefit to teaching staff and Programme Directors in monitoring their students' progress and making comparisons with other Programmes or St Mary's as a whole. More data should also be collected on the use of all Student Services, including numbers of users (and repeat users), the gender and ethnicity of service users, and – where possible – academic progression of student users. The institution should consider recording additional information regarding student complaints (both

by and about students), including the students' gender and ethnicity, in line with the recommendations made in the HEA/ECU Report (2008).

'Value added' is a method of looking at attainment which is still very much in its infancy in the Higher Education Sector. However, Rodgers (2005 and 2007) has created a model which could potentially be adapted by St Mary's and it could be particularly valuable as a way to assess the 'distance travelled' by students, in particular those who enter with non-traditional qualifications.

St Mary's should investigate ways to create a workable 'value added' model to measure distance travelled and the 'comparative institutional effect' in student attainment, ensuring it captures exogenous factors (including student motivation) as well as factors internal to this institution.

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