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Attainment at St Mary's University College Twickenham: Student Report

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Attainment at St Mary's University College Twickenham: Student Report

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November
2012



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Overview

The aim of this report is to present the findings of the student attainment project relevant for current students, including evidence-based tips for how to make the most of your education at St Mary's. The research underpinning this work was carried out between February and August 2012 and encompassed:

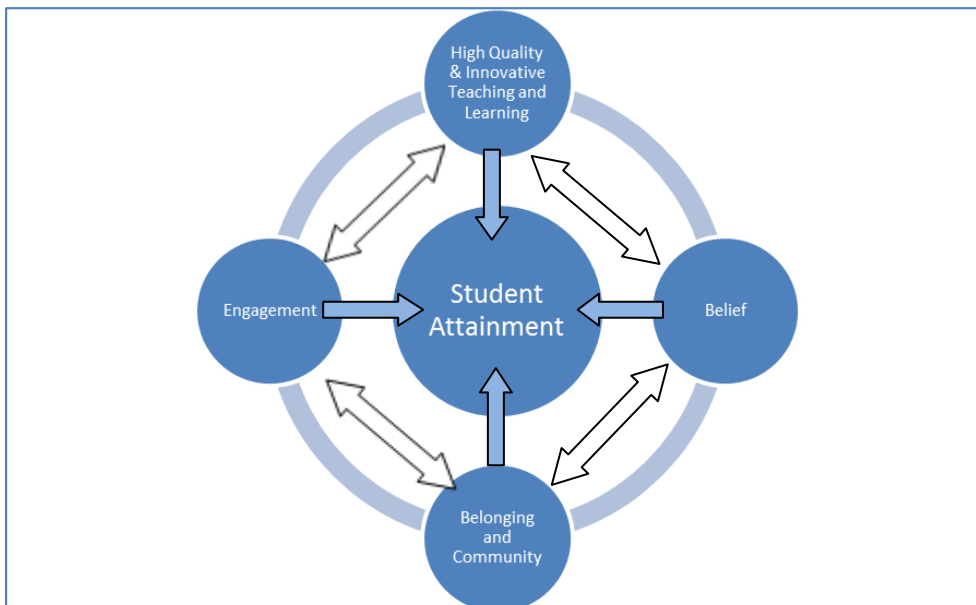
- A review of academic literature and research projects conducted in other institutions.
- An analysis of St Mary's University College Registry data relating to attainment between 2007/2008 and 2011/2012.
- An analysis of student responses to the question in the National Student Survey 2011, *'Looking 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.

The full findings and recommendations are reported in *Attainment at St Mary's University College, Twickenham* (McLaren, 2012).

Theoretical background – the cornerstones of student attainment

A review of a range of literature and research on retention and success was conducted and 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 (Clouder & Adefila, 2011a, 2011b: see Table 1 below). 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, 2012).

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. Students, equally, should be aware of how their own behaviours can impact their learning. Researchers from the University of Wolverhampton compiled a list of ten things students can do to improve degree attainment, which pulls together ideas around achievement, belief and community:

Table 1: Ten things students can do to improve degree attainment

Achievement

1. Beware plagiarism is punished severely. Embrace the learning process and ensure you acknowledge and value your ability to learn and develop critical skills, intellectual capabilities and competencies for presenting/articulating ideas.
2. Ask questions – lots of them. Ask yourself, ask your classmates, ask lecturers and tutors; even after you have been assessed, you can continue to sharpen your skills. The feedback you obtain from your assessments can help you get even better grades!
3. Understand your preferences for meeting deadlines so you can effectively plan to submit your assessments on time. Some prefer to start and complete assignments immediately they get their questions, others will think about the structure and content for days before completing the work close to the deadline. Aim to submit a first rate assignment. Be completely satisfied you have put in maximum effort on your part.

Belief

4. You should aim to get top marks on all your modules. Believe in your ability to do well at University. You were smart enough to GET IN!!!
5. Learning can be fun! Your attitude towards your learning is a fundamental feature of how well you do now and how you will be able to apply your knowledge when you are employed
6. Be instrumental – take control of your own learning by showing you are interested. Understand that your lecturers will like to know that you are ready to engage, interested in the learning process and ultimately your chosen career.

Community

7. Understand the requirements of your department and how assessments are weighted on your course. Dedicate more time and effort to modules potentially could make a marked difference to your grade. This may be your dissertation or a final year project. Focus on the prize, this means a lot of hard work but there is room for fun if you manage your time properly
8. Research shows that learning takes place more readily in collaborative groups. Learn to establish good relationships in a mix of groups
9. You do not have to love your lecturers but it will do you good to engage with them based on a respect and trust steered dimension.
10. In it to win it? Your employers will like to know you are a good life long learner are you?

[Adapted from Clouder & Adefila (2011b) *Ten Things Students Can do to Improve Degree Attainment*: <http://www2.wlv.ac.uk/celt/Projects/DISA/Ten%20things%20student.pdf> (Accessed 18th May 2012)]

Key findings and recommendations

Student attainment: variables related to background, circumstance and studies

- ***Background issues: The ethnicity and gender gap, attainment differences between Schools and joint honours courses***

Attainment patterns at St Mary's reflect nationwide trends in terms of the attainment gap between male and female students, and white students and students of other ethnicities. There is therefore also a close correlation between average grades awarded in the different academic Schools and those Schools' intake of students with particular backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity and Qualifications on Entry. Analysis of registry data also shows that more lower grades are awarded to students studying Joint courses (and in particular those whose courses span two Schools) than those studying towards Single Honours degrees. There are manifold reasons behind these attainment differences, including how backgrounds may interlink with a range of other factors such as students' prior educational experiences, family income and the necessity of combining study with term-time employment.

From 2012/2013, targeted support is being given to students from non-traditional backgrounds (i.e. students entering St Mary's from areas of low higher education participation or with alternative qualifications) 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 current BME attainment gaps. Evidence from interventions carried out elsewhere, together with responses to the surveys and interviews analysed for this project suggest that focusing on issues such as transition to university, students' academic confidence and study skills could be effective in tackling

attainment variation. The Learning Advisors will also help coordination between Programmes and Schools to ensure that Joint honours students do not ‘fall through the gaps’.

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. Action also needs to be taken on an institutional policy level to explicitly link equality issues with attainment.

Academic staff will be encouraged to maintain an awareness of the particular issues that students on their Programmes face (including as a result of their previous educational experiences) and tailor assessment methods, study skills within modules, and accessibility of teaching materials off-campus accordingly to ensure that no group is unfairly disadvantaged.

Students can help address the gap by: ensuring you know how to access relevant support services, such as the Skills Shop. Take advantage of self-reflection opportunities such as the Settling In Activity (available on the Personal section of simmsCAPital). You can also play an active role in interventions to help fellow students by volunteering to become a peer mentor.

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. This is reflected from the opposite perspective by analysis of the Student Experience, Attainment and Retention survey 2012 which showed a strong positive relationship between students who agreed their Programme met their expectations and those who agreed they were on course to achieve what they should academically.

Academic staff will be encouraged to 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.

Students can help address the gap by: becoming involved in revising St Mary's Student Charter.

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.

Academic staff will be encouraged to look at ways to further integrate academic and pastoral support further should be looked at.

Students can help address the gap by maintaining an awareness of the current Student Services offer and making suggestions for improvements.

- **Student Societies**

Currently St Mary's has a fairly narrow range of clubs and 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***

The National Student Survey 2011 revealed that communication issues are seen as a problem by some students, particularly regarding last minute changes of times and location of lectures and seminars.

Academic staff will be encouraged to inform students 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.

Students can help address the gap by ensuring that their contact details are up to date and regularly checking their St Mary's e-mail account.

- ***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.

St Mary's University College will be encouraged to introduce a compulsory workshop session into induction week that focuses on issues such as time-management and balancing academic and other commitments, as well as to consider introducing guidance for recommended numbers of hours worked in employment per week during term time.

Students can help address the gap by trying to strike the right balance between study and paid employment and avoid missing lectures for the sake of term-time work. The Careers Service can help you find ‘university friendly’ jobs, including some on campus.

Institutional issues: 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, 2012).

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.

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