

## Guest editors' introduction to special theme issue: Retaining attrition?

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### Rationale

Contemporary universities have identified tackling student attrition and retention as crucial to their successful operations. Indications of the importance with which these issues are treated include the following:

- The use of attrition and progression statistics as indicators of teaching quality, for example by Australia's Department of Education, Science and Training (2005);
- The extensive scholarship pertaining to this field, evidenced for example by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) devoting a full chapter to persistence and completion in their synthesis of research on how college affects students. Recent books on attrition include Braxton (2000), Seidman (2005), Simpson (2003) and Yorke and Longden (2004). Tinto's (1993) model provided a firm foundation for the development of the subsequent literature;
- The establishment in 1996 of the Center for the Study of College Student Retention in the United States (retrieved November 10, 2005, from <http://www.cscsr.org/about.htm>) and the subsequent launch in 1999 of the *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice* (retrieved November 10, 2005, from [http://www.cscsr.org/retention\\_journal.htm](http://www.cscsr.org/retention_journal.htm));
- The regular collection of and analysis of cross-institutional attrition data, for example by the Department of Education, Science and Training (Lukic, Broadbent & Maclachlan (2004) and the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (retrieved December 15, 2005, from <http://www.ou.edu/csrde/index.html>);
- The close attention paid to this field by such institutions as the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education (retrieved November 10, 2005, from <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/>) and the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in Australia (retrieved November 10, 2005, from <http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au/carrick/go>), the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom (retrieved November 10, 2005, from <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the United States (retrieved November 10, 2005, from <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/>).

Given both the longstanding character and the continuing relevance of research into student attrition and retention, it is timely to publish this special theme issue of *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* on this topic. In particular, the theme issue has been designed to promote and contribute to this field of literature by challenging the usually implicit retention/attrition binary. It has done this by coordinating multiple perspectives on the issue of university student progression, thereby highlighting the complexity and situatedness of a phenomenon that resists a ‘one size fits all’ set of standardised policy responses, based on an assumption of “If we fix these aspects of attrition, retention will rise”.

Hence the hopefully provocative question constituting the theme issue’s title: “Retaining attrition?” This was intended to denote the contradictions among different constructions of attrition: some stakeholders perceive it as a marker of high standards and assured quality and therefore as something worthwhile retaining; others see it as reflecting students exercising agency to decide whether they wish to continue with university life; and others construct it as a personal tragedy and an organisational failing. This diversity of viewpoints applies also to retention, with some perceiving it as the marker of an effective student-university relationship and others linking it to different but interlinked responsibilities for students graduating from their programs.

Given this diversity of viewpoints, it is appropriate to bring together a range of perspectives on, and experiences of, student attrition and retention. The aims of “Retaining Attrition?” were to explore in different institutional settings how respective stakeholders engage with student attrition and retention, and to reflect on the possible implications of those engagements for contemporary society. The purpose of the theme issue is to help to transform the binaries of attrition and retention into a multiplicity of frameworks that contributes to scholarship and practice in this increasingly complex and diverse field.

Similarly, the journal’s focus on “publishing research that explores education that is multidisciplinary, multimodal and multisectoral in character—and that is also formal and informal, lifelong and lifewide, and liable to contribute to sociocultural resistance and transformation” is promoted by means of the theme issue’s bringing together articles that cover multimodal learning in five universities in two countries (with the respondent representing a third country), informed by analytical frames drawn from different disciplines such as economics and language learning. The potential contribution to “sociocultural resistance and transformation” is facilitated by the articles’ common concern with promoting practices and systems that are accessible to, and meaningful and productive for, students, encapsulated in the theme issue’s subtitle “Investigating the student-institution relationship in contemporary universities”.

The guest editing of this special theme issue is part of a broader research project centred on student attrition and retention at Central Queensland University and more recently at the University of Southern Queensland. With interested others we have conducted seminars and written papers (Alcock, et al., 2004; Bowser, Danaher & Somasundaram, 2004, 2005; Danaher, Somasundaram & Bowser, 2004), with a view to raising the profile of this important topic, to articulating with the current national and international emphasis on the topic as a performance indicator of quality in contemporary universities and to highlighting the complex and contested character of both attrition and retention. Thus in our own work we have sought to interrogate and engage with some of the numerous implications of the question that is neither automatically contradictory nor rhetorical: “Retaining attrition?”.

## Overview

The seven articles in this special theme issue (each of which has been anonymously peer reviewed by two referees) have been arranged in a structured sequence to move from what might be considered the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’ of student attrition and retention and associated issues pertaining to student-institution relationships in contemporary universities. Thus the articles proceed from considering more general and in some ways generic questions of student support and economics to specific cases of groups of students often considered to be particularly vulnerable to attrition.

The first three articles take up this ‘macro’ perspective. In the first article, Deborah Peach focuses on the crucial role played by university support services in helping to improve the quality of the student learning experience. Drawing on research conducted at an Australian metropolitan university and informed by theoretical modelling derived from cultural historical activity theory and expansive visibilisation, Peach examines the respective merits and drawbacks of universities providing centralised and/or faculty-specific support services. She concludes that there are enduring tensions between these approaches and the associated separation between content and generic skill development.

In the second article, Jill Lawrence elaborates and integrates theoretical, research and student perspectives to move towards a reconceptualisation of student attrition and retention. Lawrence pursues this elaboration and integration by using critical discourse theory and constructivism to call for a shift from deficit to discourse in understanding university culture, and by developing two conceptual representations based on her empirical research at the University of Southern Queensland: the Framework for Student Transition and Retention; and the Model for Student Success Practices. She concludes by considering the implications of this reconceptualisation for students and universities alike.

Ormond Simpson uses the third article to identify the commonalities and differences among student, institution and government perspectives on the costs and benefits of student retention. Despite these differences, Simpson argues that the financial interests of all three groups are maximised by deploying strategies to enhance student retention, and furthermore that those strategies can be self-funding and even profitable. He illustrates this argument with detailed statistics taken generally from the United Kingdom and specifically from his own institution, the Open University.

The remaining four articles in the theme issue engage with the ‘micro’ perspective represented by a number of specific groups of students who for different reasons are traditionally vulnerable to attrition. In the fourth article, Muriel Strahm and Geoff Danaher consider the case of pre-undergraduate students in a specialised program (the STEPS program at Central Queensland University) who would otherwise be unlikely to attend university. Strahm and Danaher consider the effectiveness of a student questionnaire in helping these students to reflect on the respective contributions that they, their fellow students and their lecturer play in promoting their learning opportunities and achievement. The authors assert that the questionnaire is a useful strategy that, when taken in concert with other initiatives, can help to enhance student retention.

The fifth and sixth articles are concerned with a group of learners who are considered particularly vulnerable to attrition: first year undergraduate students. Kerri-Lee Krause uses the fifth article to examine the characteristics of

undergraduates who consider seriously withdrawing from study during their first year. She draws on data taken from a national study conducted by her colleagues and herself from the University of Melbourne in 2004 of the first year experience in Australian universities to distil several clear differences in the characteristics of “potential dropouts” and “persisters”. Krause concludes that building enduring partnerships among all stakeholders in the learning enterprise is crucial if the “potential dropouts” are to turn into “persisters”.

K. A. Gallie is concerned in the sixth article with a group of learners with traditionally high attrition rates: i.e., first year students who study at a physical distance from their lecturers and fellow students. Gallie reflects on the changes that she instituted to her introductory occupational health and safety course in relation to such features as communication, interaction and respective responsibilities on the part of lecturer and students. She contends that the significantly reduced attrition rate among students after the changes had been introduced simultaneously alerts us to the multifaceted ingredients in course design and student retention and augurs well for such retention in future iterations of the course.

The final article by Carol Ann Ferguson and Peter Grainger presents a counter to the traditionally high attrition by students learning a second or foreign language such as Japanese. They use the results of a questionnaire administered to current and former students of the Bachelor of Learning Management (Japanese) program at Central Queensland University to identify several features of the program that they argue are responsible for the considerably reduced attrition of students. While highlighting the benefits of fostering personalised working relationships and catering to students’ individual needs, Ferguson and Grainger acknowledge the potential difficulties of achieving these outcomes with larger student cohorts.

The theme issue concludes with the respondent’s text, written by Professor Vincent Tinto, Distinguished University Professor in the School of Education at Syracuse University in the United States. Tinto uses his role of respondent as an opportunity to synthesise and reflect on the resonances and potential contradictions among the seven articles presented here, observed from the perspective of someone who has spent more than three decades researching in this field—much of that time devoted to highlighting the complexities and contradictions entailed in considerations of “Retaining attrition?”.

The issue also includes a review by Don Bowser of Alan Seidman’s edited book, *College student retention: Formula for student success*. This is a book by a number of leading contributors to the field of student attrition and retention.

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