

Student retention in further education: a problem of quality or of student finance?

by

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Introduction

In recent years, issues concerned with the retention and withdrawal of students have assumed renewed importance in the further education (FE) sector. There have been increased pressures from the government and its agencies to demonstrate value for money in the use of public finance. Attention has therefore been drawn to the potential waste represented by students who enrol on colleges courses, but who fail to complete them, and often leave without recording any measurable achievement in terms of recognised qualifications. The arrangements for funding colleges, which were established when they were removed from local authority control and given corporate status, reward retention and successful completion, and penalise withdrawal and non-achievement, much more directly than was the case in previous years. Students are counted for funding purposes at three points in the year, and a significant withdrawal rate, especially when its main incidence is early in the course (which is often the case) presents a college with a potentially crippling financial liability. For this reason, more than any other, management teams and staff are striving to reduce unavoidable drop-out to a minimum.

This paper presents a brief summary of the evidence concerning student retention and withdrawal in the sector. It then sets out in more detail the findings of research in which the author participated, on behalf of the Further Education Development Agency (FEDA), which challenge some of the popular beliefs about the principal influences on student withdrawal. Such beliefs tend to emphasise external factors - in particular, problems related to student financial hardship - above issues related to the perceived quality of the educational experience within the sphere of colleges' control.

Published evidence on retention and withdrawal

The problem identified

Until very recent years, published research on this topic is notable for its paucity. The limited evidence, which did appear, tended to be confined to government-inspired reports, which focused mainly on schools. In general, these pointed to the impact of demographic factors: home background, social class and poverty (CACE 1954 & 1959, DES/CLEA 1980). The Crowther Report had indicated concern about the poor success rates for part-time courses in technical colleges - some as low as 6%, and rarely exceeding 50% (Ministry of Education 1959). Amongst other things it recommended that the situation might be improved by developing a tutorial system.

High levels of attrition persisted, however, as revealed by the publication of the HMI Report *Student completion rates* (DES 1991). It indicated that overall 13% of students had withdrawn within six months of enrolment, and that withdrawal rates varied from almost zero to 40%. It then drew attention, on the one hand, to a number of strategies via which colleges might improve their retention rates: better pre-course publicity and information, improved guidance and selection procedures, the introduction of induction and diagnostic processes, and innovation in teaching

and learning support with particular regard to tutorials.

On the other hand, the report presented data in such a way as to suggest that scope for intervention by colleges was relatively limited. Around 80% of student withdrawals were attributed either to personal reasons, including financial problems, changed family or work circumstances, or to progression to employment or other courses. Ten per cent of withdrawn students were said to have left their courses for no discernible reason, leaving only a further 10% who withdrew for other reasons, either associated with the programme, or with poor performance on their own part.

A shift in these perceptions occurred in 1992 & 1993 with the publication of two further reports - *Measuring up: performance indicators in further education* (SOED 1992), and *Unfinished Business* (Audit Commission/Ofsted 1993). These documents declared student completion to be a matter of key importance. Wide variations in levels of performance both within and between institutions were held to warrant detailed investigation (though otherwise no clear evidence was presented that linked differences in retention and achievement to variations in institutional quality). High drop-out rates were said to be unacceptable. The overall level of non-completion in FE was declared to be too high, and was condemned as a substantial waste of national resources. Another more recent study recognised that retention rates were often worryingly low, but identified the lack of motivation by some students as a major factor in non-completion (Dearing 1996).

Student finance

The confused and variable arrangements for FE student financial support have come in for increasing criticism of late, especially from those concerned to bring about sustained improvements in levels of participation and achievement post-16. The report of the Widening Participation Committee of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) concluded that "*the present system is neither fair nor transparent: a root and branch review is needed*" (Kennedy 1997). Further research has described the detail of this so-called "*funding lottery*" (Herbert and Callender 1997). More recent work has identified the existence of considerable financial hardship amongst FE students, especially adults from poorer backgrounds with children (Callender 1999). Research carried out for FEDA by the consultancy *Inside Track* suggests that reductions in student financial support over the past few years are having an impact both on access to FE and on the quality of the student experience (Sheldon M forthcoming). In the main, it is mature students who are finding it more difficult to gain access to FE as support through local authority discretionary awards has diminished. Students of all ages are under pressure to reduce their involvement in college to a minimum as part-time work becomes an increasingly important source of funding. In specialist colleges, students who might previously have been able to go into college residences are now spending more time on daily travel, which has in turn led to them missing aspects of life at college. Students in practical subjects which require expenditure on materials, or visits, are particularly likely to suffer hardship.

There is an increasing range of evidence to suggest that young people in the UK are

significantly more economically active than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, including high percentages in (supposedly) full-time education who devote lengthy periods each week to paid employment (DfEE 1998; Hodgson and Spours 1999a; Robinson 1999; Davies forthcoming). A study of A level and GNVQ students has indicated that those working for longer periods in paid employment were more likely to have attained lower average GCSE scores and to have performed less well at A level and in Advanced GNVQs (University of Durham 1999).

Nevertheless, though many are convinced of a vital link between financial circumstances, participation, and successful completion, hard statistical evidence for its existence is slight. It is also acknowledged to be more apparent in the case of initial participation than it is where the retention of already enrolled students is concerned. This is not to deny the existence of substantial levels of financial hardship, or its effect on students' quality of life. The most authoritative study of FE students reveals that:

- over half claimed to experience financial hardship, 70% encountering problems meeting course-related costs;
- just under a quarter had considered dropping out for financial reasons;
- over a third considered that financial difficulties negatively affected their academic performance (Callender 1999).

However, as acknowledged in an earlier study, a limitation of this approach to the problem is that "*the circumstances of students dropping out are not compared with those who do not*" (Herbert and Callender 1997). As I shall suggest, it is within the differences in the profiles of those who complete successfully and those who do not that we are most likely to uncover the main influences on non-completion.

Other studies suggest that financial hardship is less associated with drop-out than might be assumed from the evidence quoted above. One indicated that whilst over half of some 6,500 FE students surveyed were worried about the cost of travelling to, or supporting themselves on, their course, travel methods and distances had no significant impact on retention rates (Responsive College Unit 1998). Others have suggested that the large majority of full-time students with paid employment felt they could cope with the combination, and earned more to maintain a preferred lifestyle than because of the pressure of course-related or basic living costs (Hodgson and Spours 1999b; Davies 1999a).

Lastly, the fact that differences between the student retention and achievement rates of individual colleges continue to be large, even within the group serving student populations with the highest levels of deprivation, implies that the major influences are operating at college level, unconnected to the financial circumstances of individual students (FEFC 1998).

College information systems

Research conducted by FEDA and its predecessor bodies from 1994 found that

methodological flaws were leading to misleading conclusions about the main reasons for student withdrawal. In particular, college-based information systems sometimes demonstrated serious deficiencies in data collection on student withdrawals. Reasons for withdrawal were recorded for by no means all courses. Significant minorities of current students were classified as withdrawn, and vice versa (usually because a transfer of course had not been picked up, or a student's absence had not extended for long enough for it to have been officially recorded as a withdrawal). More seriously, the common methodology for recording reasons for withdrawal was flawed.

Colleges tended to use the data collection system recommended in 1987 (DES/WO). When students were held to have withdrawn - usually after four weeks of non-attendance without good reason - a member of the academic staff completed a return and attributed the reason for the withdrawal to one of a number of causes. Several objections can be levelled at this approach. First, it required teaching staff to choose "one main reason" for the withdrawal whilst decisions to leave may well be prompted by more than one reason. Second, it put the onus for data collection on the teacher, which may make it difficult to collect accurate information, either because a withdrawing student may have been reluctant to communicate any implied or direct criticism of the course, or because the teacher may have been reluctant to hear such criticism. Third, the exclusive focus on early leavers may have concealed similarities of attitude and experience with those students who have not withdrawn.

FEDA research into student withdrawal

In 1994 and 1995, FEDA and its predecessor organisations - the Further Education Unit (FEU), and The Staff College - undertook detailed research projects into the causes of student withdrawal at the commission of three different FE colleges - the Isle of Wight, and two London colleges. In the case of the latter two, the chosen methodology involved the administration of an identical questionnaire to a representative sample of current and withdrawn students, the design of which was derived from focus groups previously conducted with staff and students. The questionnaire incorporated a list of 35 possible reasons for withdrawal, and all respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each had applied to them personally during their time at the college.

These pieces of research reached very similar findings. For the sake of clarity and brevity, the summary which follows is based on the outcomes of the last of these surveys, involving one of the London colleges. The results were derived from an analysis of 413 completed questionnaires, approximately one-third of which (34%) were obtained from withdrawn students. The profile of respondents indicated that both *current* and *withdrawn* groups were representative of their overall numbers and distribution in the college concerned, allowing a reliable basis for analysis.

The incidence of student withdrawal at the College

In April 1995, the records of the college in question showed that around 23% of students enrolled the previous September had withdrawn from their courses. Since most withdrawals take place during the first two terms of the academic year it seemed reasonable to infer that ultimately about one quarter of students did not complete their programmes of study.

Withdrawal was not equally distributed across departments or courses. Across the different departments, the percentage of courses with withdrawal rates of 20% or more varied between 33% and 56% of the courses delivered. Using a higher figure of withdrawal rates of 40% or more, the percentage of such courses within those run by the different departments varied between 3% and 26%.

What specific characteristics distinguished students who dropped out?

While teachers and managers at the College acknowledged that completion rates could be improved, there were clearly expressed views that students "at risk" of non-completion comprised a number of identifiable groups.

In fact, there was a substantial continuity of the viewpoint that a number of the characteristics of the student community accounted for a substantial proportion of the student withdrawals. *Financial problems, poor English, low motivation, prior educational experiences, family and health problems, and low self-esteem* had all been identified at one stage or another as significant components of the non-completion problem.

Empirical support for this view was derived from the College's procedure for identifying the causes of student withdrawal, using 23 tutor-allocated codes as part of the Programme Profile. The impression generated using this methodology was broadly in line with the outputs of similar systems in other colleges, and was to the effect that it was very difficult for a college to (a) identify in advance students who were "at risk" of non-completion and (b) cater for such students if they could be identified.

Thus, to pick an example at random, the College records showed that in the Department of Creative and Community Studies, the 194 withdrawals between September 1994 and 1 May 1995 were caused primarily by financial hardship, family, health and personal problems, with only one being attributed to dissatisfaction with the course. Similarly, within the research sample, for the students who were identified by the College as having withdrawn, the College's records indicated the reasons for the non-completion of 17% as course related (in the main attributed to difficulties in coping with the course); 11% as career / employment related; 25% as financial / personal / health reasons; and 45% as "other" or unknown.

Without in any way calling into question the integrity and honesty of the teaching staff involved, many of whom we observed to have made strenuous efforts to help

and assist students, we were sceptical of the reliability of this data, for reasons already described.

Reasons for withdrawal - evidence from the questionnaire survey

Demographic and factual differences between current and withdrawn students

Only two statistically significant relationships were found between the status of respondents (*current* or *withdrawn*) and other demographic and factual variables. (*Note, here, that social class was not used as a basis for analysis, since large numbers of students at the college in question came from poor family backgrounds.*)

These were with the *highest level of qualification aspired to*, and *year of study*. Withdrawn respondents were relatively more likely to have aspired to *Foundation GNVQ/NVQ Level 1 or equivalent* qualifications, or to a *First degree*. Unsurprisingly, withdrawn respondents were much less likely to have proceeded beyond the *first year* of their course. There were no statistically significant differences by ethnicity when each separate ethnic grouping of respondents was compared according to their withdrawal rate.

Differences in attitude and opinion between current and withdrawn students

Withdrawn and current students could not be differentiated in terms of their apparent motivation. Moreover, both groups had very similar patterns of agreement on the relative importance which they attached to different aspects of the College. Only in the case of *adult atmosphere* did withdrawn respondents record a mean rating which was significantly higher. These similarities between the two groups once again suggested that they were not intrinsically different types, with different priorities. *It was therefore striking that far more differences between the two groups were identified when their relative satisfaction with various aspects of College was compared.*

Firstly, withdrawn respondents' ratings for the *enrolment process*, and for *help in settling into the course*, were significantly lower than for the current group. Given the closeness in their importance ratings, it was then noteworthy that many more statistically significant differences were identified when the relative quality ratings for the two groups were compared. Here, withdrawn respondents recorded a significantly lower opinion of the College for:

- *quality of the teaching;*
- *helpful and supportive teachers;*
- *help in getting qualified;*
- *well organised teachers;*
- *timing of classes;* and
- *help and advice with course work.*

Note that all but one of these differences occurred in relation to features concerning

teaching quality and support, all of which rated as amongst the most important to respondents.

These findings are illuminated further by the relative ratings for the two groups for the applicability to themselves of the possible reasons for withdrawal, mentioned earlier. Withdrawn respondents were significantly more likely to have identified *dissatisfied with quality of teaching, course boring, and dissatisfied with administration of course*, as reasons which applied to themselves. Conversely, current respondents were more likely to have identified *poor college social life*. The incidence of *personal problems, financial hardship, insufficient financial assistance, and conflict between job and studies*, was not significantly greater among the withdrawn group. A similar and sizeable minority of all respondents appeared to encounter these problems.

Withdrawn respondents were more likely to have recorded a *worse* experience of the College compared with their expectations before they enrolled, and less likely to have had a *better* one. This does not appear to be explained by the fact that withdrawn respondents had unrealistically high expectations, as there was no statistically significant difference between the relative mean ratings of the two groups for their opinion of the College before enrolment.

Lastly, the withdrawn group were more likely to have indicated that they *would not encourage someone else to attend a course at the College*, and less likely to have responded that they *would definitely do so*.

Out of all the analysis which was undertaken, the strongest link between the current status of respondents (*current* or *withdrawn*) and the other variables on which data was collected was with the ratings for the College against the criterion *helpful and supportive teachers*. Almost 59% of those who gave low ratings to this aspect were withdrawn students, although the withdrawn group comprised only just over a third of respondents overall.

The key determinants of withdrawal

Taken overall the findings of this survey, as with the two earlier ones, presented a powerful argument that key influences on withdrawal were:

- not those which were most often recorded officially; and
- within the control of the College, rather than being determined by external factors.

Specifically, we concluded:

- With the exception of *social class* (also linked to prior attainment), there were no obvious demographic or motivational differences which would allow a meaningful "at risk" category to be identified from the data captured at enrolment. (As I have noted, social class is not a particularly useful distinguishing characteristic of an "at risk" group in the circumstances of an inner-city college, where a high proportion of students live in deprived circumstances.)

- The distinguishing characteristic of withdrawn students, compared with those who stayed on, was the relatively lower level of satisfaction of the former group with factors connected with *teaching quality and support*.
- Students also perceived the factors *personal problems, financial hardship, insufficient financial assistance, and conflict between job and studies*, as being amongst the most important causes of withdrawal. However, the incidence of these difficulties did not seem to be any greater for those who withdrew than for those who were retained.

We interpreted these findings to mean that the true reasons for withdrawal were often complex, with a number of factors contributing to the decision not to continue. The scales appeared to tip in favour of withdrawal when the occurrence of a personal, financial, or employment related problem coincided with a relative lack of confidence in the quality of support at classroom level. Where there was a high level of satisfaction and confidence in the quality of teaching, then the college appeared to represent a powerful support mechanism which allowed external problems to be handled without withdrawal.

I must emphasise that our findings did not indicate that the general quality of teaching at the College concerned was poor. Most withdrawn students did not rate it badly for factors connected with teaching quality. In the main, they also recorded higher ratings for such factors than they did for others connected with some of the facilities. However, the findings did indicate that the experience of many withdrawn students of the activities most central to the operation of the college, and to which they attributed the greatest importance, was less satisfactory than that of current students. This conclusion was reinforced by the outcomes of the student focus groups, where those who participated (these were current students) expressed warm appreciation for many teachers and tutors, whilst also making strong criticisms of some teaching practices and behaviours.

Subsequent FEDA studies of student retention

Further investigations by FEDA with much larger and robust samples have broadly confirmed the findings of the survey outlined above. A study of non-completion on GNVQ courses involving a sample of over 3,000 current and withdrawn students concluded that levels of student satisfaction in a number of course-related areas were the variables that linked most strongly with rates of non- and unsuccessful completion, viz:

- induction, and the degree to which it was felt that the GNVQ chosen was the right course;
- the level of interest generated by the content of the course;
- the perceived quality of teaching, the relationship with teachers and the help and support they provided;
- (at Advanced level) the perceived help in progressing to higher level

qualifications, including those at university.

The personal circumstances of students, including financial difficulties were found to have some link with non-completion rates, but less so than for course-related factors (FEDA 1998).

A more general study of the issue involving some 9,000 students in 31 different colleges arrived at somewhat similar conclusions (Martinez and Munday 1998). The main conclusions were:

- in aggregate, student decisions to complete their programmes of study were less strongly influenced by demography and other factors external to the college, than they were by students' attitudes to their experiences at college;
- the timing of applications was important, with students who applied earliest being less likely to drop out;
- completing and non-completing students were quite strongly differentiated by their evaluations of the experience of college, notably in respect of their placement on appropriate courses, assistance with progression to employment or university, the timetabling of courses, the intrinsic interest of their courses, the perceived quality of the teaching and their relationships with teachers;
- students who had further to travel to get to college were also more likely to withdraw;
- differences in prior expectations of college and in levels of satisfaction with college facilities were not in themselves a good indicator of likelihood of completion.

Personal circumstances were found to have some influence on withdrawal, though financial difficulties were less commonly linked with it amongst younger students than amongst adults.

Evidence from these studies of the problems associated with student retention is supported by the findings of other work undertaken by FEDA in recent years on behalf of individual colleges, involving the analysis of almost 23,000 returns to surveys of student satisfaction undertaken in conjunction with the requirements of *The Charter for Further Education*. Taken overall, the results of such surveys have revealed that the variables which most strongly correlate with the rating for *overall satisfaction* with a college, or the *propensity to recommend somebody else to attend*, are those connected with the opinions of the *help received in settling in* and of the *quality of teaching*, rather than with the perceptions of other aspects of the service provided, or with demographic factors. Almost half of the students involved expressed dissatisfaction with the level of financial assistance they received, but opinion in this area linked much less strongly with overall levels of satisfaction than the factors mentioned previously (Davies 1999b).

Solutions

In parallel with these studies, the outcomes of action research with a number of

colleges suggest the adoption of a range of interventionist strategies can have significant short-term effects on non-completion rates. These include rigorous early follow-up of absence from class, improvements to induction programmes and tutorial support, and student mentoring schemes (Martinez, 1996).

Additional work undertaken in a number of colleges and adult education services has identified three broad types of successful strategy (Martinez 1997):

- curriculum;
- support;
- managerial.

Curriculum initiatives included a diverse group of interventions which extended from fundamental changes of curriculum strategy (unitisation, open and flexible learning, development of learning support and learning to learn strategies) to a large variety of changes at programme and course level. Other curriculum initiatives included more rigorous and comprehensive initial assessment, changes to induction processes and steps to improve student motivation, the review and refocusing of tutoring systems, and curriculum audit and review.

Effective support strategies included measures to provide financial, childcare, transport and other types of learner support; improvements to information and guidance services; and systems to identify and support “at-risk” students.

Changes in resource allocation systems, the development of whole college and whole service retention strategies, the introduction of procedures to agree, monitor and take corrective action to achieve retention targets, and the enhancement of student tracking and management information (MIS) systems all came within the third grouping of managerial initiatives.

Further qualitative research undertaken by FEDA suggests that successful strategies to raise student achievement encompass those identified as supporting improvements in retention (Martinez 2000).

Conclusions and implications

The evidence summarised in this paper suggests that, of itself, an enhancement student finance would have less impact on raising rates of student retention and achievement than the adoption of strategies to improve “academic” quality, throughout a student’s experience at college from induction to progression. This is not to deny the existence of high levels of financial hardship, nor to minimise its impact on students’ quality of life. Nor, also, is it to suggest that reforms in student finance could not play a substantial part in helping to widen participation, or in encouraging some adult students to progress to more advanced studies once they had completed their course.

Although financial difficulties are a common trigger of student drop-out, in general

withdrawal appears to result only in cases where students have doubts that they are on the right course, are concerned about the quality of the teaching and are unhappy with the support they are receiving for progression. Where students are fully satisfied in these areas they appear to be prepared to ride out the financial problem and to stay the course successfully. Indeed, they often perceive the college as a key support mechanism in their ability to do so, and become powerful advocates for further education as a consequence.

The loudest and clearest message from FEDA's research is therefore both reassuring and challenging. It is reassuring in that it suggests that colleges within the FE sector can make a substantial improvement in their retention rates by acting on aspects of the student experience which are well within their control. It ought to be reassuring to teaching staff, since it emphasises the paramount importance of their work in determining students' perceptions of the overall quality of their experience at college. There are also clear indications about the practical steps which can be taken to establish and maintain valid college records on the extent and causes of student withdrawal, and to follow-up absentees rigorously at an early stage.

The challenge is twofold: what are the most cost-effective ways of identifying "at risk" students at an early stage, and what kind of improvements need to be made to teaching quality? The answers are likely to be related, since our research indicates some evidence that, compared with those who stay the course, the cohorts of withdrawn students contain larger numbers who, in fact, have encountered lower quality learning experiences, as opposed to exhibiting a more critical attitude to the same experiences.

This raises issues concerning methodology. The best early indicator of students who are more likely to withdraw from their courses would appear to be middling-to-low ratings for teaching quality and support during the induction period and first stages of a course. However, this information is of limited value if it cannot be tracked back to the individuals concerned, which means the use of questionnaires which are no longer anonymous, whatever data protection and confidentiality safeguards are built in by the use of unique student codes known only to the researchers. A further possibility is the identification of pockets of "at risk" students by performing analysis on the basis of the course codes attached to individual teachers, in order to identify those associated with quality ratings which are significantly lower than the mean for all equivalent courses, and with higher drop-out rates in the past. (Individual courses usually contain numbers which are too small to generate statistically significant differences, whilst comparisons at departmental or faculty level are at too high a level of aggregation to provide a useful lead towards remedial action.)

Proposals to direct analysis in this way are likely to be controversial, and to be treated with suspicion by teaching staff understandably concerned about the possible use of such data in performance appraisal. In principle, however, such evidence is a potentially invaluable element of a college system of quality assurance, based on the ideal of a commitment to continuous improvement. Here, the results of

this kind of analysis would not be used in an inspectorial sense, to apportion blame, but to highlight possible problem areas, to seek remedies, and to support those concerned in applying them. Equally, the identification of teachers with significantly better than average satisfaction and retention ratings could be helpful, since such individuals might be using effective strategies from which others could learn. Of course, evidence of a problem area should not be interpreted automatically to mean that the causes lie with the teacher concerned. It may, for instance, be symptomatic of individuals who have been persuaded to teach subjects for which they do not consider themselves qualified, or of classes which are inadequately resourced.

More research is also needed into the relationship between rates of retention and achievement and such factors as programme area, class size, taught hours and other aspects of the structuring of the timetable.

At the level of national policy, decision-makers should take care not to ignore issues connected with student finance, and to assume that retention is solely a matter to be tackled within the responsibilities of colleges. As we have seen, there is evidence that carefully targeted financial assistance would have a positive impact - especially on poorer adult students with childcare responsibilities. Furthermore, in the ultimate it is unrealistic to believe that there could never be a close link between student finance and completion rates. It has long been known that there is no observable relationship between the amount of funding per student that colleges receive, and the quality of their outputs. Yet no-one has suggested that it follows logically from this that colleges could be expected to deliver the highest levels of quality with zero funding! In the same way, it is reasonable to believe that a level of hardship could yet be reached which would provoke withdrawal from significant numbers of students who were not in any way dissatisfied with their experience at college.

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