

**learning
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Improving student retention and achievement

**What do we know and
what do we need to find out ?**

Paul Martinez

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Feedback should be sent to:
Information Services
Learning and Skills Development Agency
3 Citadel Place, Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EF.
Tel 020 7962 1066 Fax 020 7962 1258
enquiries@LSDA.org.uk

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Note

The Learning and Skills Development Agency
was formerly known as FEDA.

Further information

For further information on the issues discussed
in this publication please contact:
Anna Reisenberger
Quality Improvement Programmes Manager
Learning and Skills Development Agency
3 Citadel Place, Tinworth Street, London SE11 5EF.
Tel 020 7840 5323 Fax 020 7840 5401
areisenberger@LSDA.org.uk

Raising Quality and Achievement Programme

The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is
run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency
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- We aim to reach all colleges and all levels of staff.
- We offer extra support to colleges that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is sponsored by DfES and all activities are subsidised.

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Introduction

This is a good time to take stock of the state of our knowledge of retention and achievement issues in the learning and skills sector. It is often useful to take a couple of steps back to review a field of knowledge: it is particularly important now for three reasons.

- Improving student retention and achievement has, first, a particularly high priority for the college, and, indeed, the new learning and skills sector. The success of the sector may well be measured against improvements in these performance measures. It is essential, therefore, to summarise messages from research undertaken to date.
- Much of this research is not in the public domain. Research reviews have a limited shelf-life, but a single review of what has been done should be helpful.
- There is a growing recognition that, in comparison with schools, post-compulsory education is relatively under-researched. The sponsors of research (DfES, ESRC, Scottish Executive) seem to be willing to devote more resources to research in the learning and skills sector. It should be helpful, therefore, to identify some priorities for future research, based on a review of what has already been accomplished.

The structure of this report follows this rationale:

- messages from retention and achievement research
- description of available research
- priorities for future research.

This report is based in parts on a comparison between college and school research. This will appear as 'Effectiveness and improvement: school and college research compared' in a forthcoming issue of *Research in post-compulsory education*.

Messages from research

Broadly speaking, research in retention and achievement falls into two broad categories:

- research that investigates the perceived problems of drop-out or failure to achieve qualification goals
- research that identifies possible solutions: how providers can improve or raise retention and achievement rates.

As we shall see, the great majority of this research has been undertaken within the college part of the learning and skills sector.

The questions addressed most frequently in college research on retention and achievement are:

- What causes student withdrawal?
- Which causes of withdrawal are within the influence or control of colleges?
- What makes the most difference to student completion and withdrawal?
- Where should colleges concentrate their energies to make improvements?

At the beginning of the 1990s, the prevailing view, faithfully reflected in an authoritative report from HM Inspectorate (1991), was that drop-out was largely due to factors external to colleges. The main thrust of research since then has been to displace that view.

Demographic factors

In Britain, withdrawn students do not have a markedly different profile from completing students in terms of age, ethnicity or gender (Martinez 1995, 1997a, Martinez and Munday 1998, Stack 1999).

Unlike schools, colleges do not have entitlement to free school meals to serve as a convenient indicator of social class. The proxy indicator used in the FE sector is therefore the relative economic and social deprivation of the electoral ward where a student lives. Research has demonstrated, however, that social deprivation measured in this way correlates poorly with retention and achievement across the college sector as a whole (Davies and Rudden 2000 p2). A relationship has been identified, but only in the 10% of colleges which recruit the highest proportion of their students from postcodes which score most highly on the index of deprivation. Even in this minority of colleges, variations in the demographic composition of the student intake seem to account for no more than 50% of the variation in college performance as measured by the achievement of qualification aims (Davies 2001). The only study which has asserted a significant 'postcode impact' (Vallender 1998) did not consider any intervening variables, notably mode of attendance, level of programme or subject/curriculum area.

Student motivation

While college research has shown consistently that efforts to improve or maintain student motivation can lead to better retention and achievement (Martinez 1997b, 2000), it also suggests strongly that the initial motivations of students as expressed by their reasons for enrolling, aspirations, expectations of college, etc do not vary significantly between students who subsequently stay and students who leave (Martinez 1995, 1997a, Lamping and Ball 1996, Kenwright 1997, Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998).

A detailed study that explored student self-esteem and beliefs about their ability to manage and control their learning within a relatively small sample of successful and unsuccessful students did not find any marked differences between them (Stack 1999).

Student decision making

Medway and Penney (1994) were among the first to suggest that the student decision-making process could be characterised as a continuous weighing of the costs of continuing with, or abandoning, a programme of study and that decisions to leave resulted 'from rational decisions to respond to the difficulties [students] faced' (ibid p38). These early conclusions have been borne out by subsequent research. Using a variety of methods, and with samples of up to 9000 students, college research has shown that students have complex and multiple reasons for withdrawing from programmes of study and that decisions to withdraw can be seen as rational and positive from the point of view of students (Martinez 1995, Crossan 1996, Adamson *et al* 1998, Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998, Searle 1998, Bloomer and Hodgkinson 1999, Adamson and McAleavy 2000, Freeman 2000).

Several studies show that students usually leave courses for a mixture of reasons (Medway and Penney 1994, Martinez 1995, Kenwright 1997, Vick 1997). One implication of this finding is that the widespread practice of recording only one or the 'main' reason for student withdrawal by colleges, officially sanctioned by FEFC (FEFC 1996 p4), misrepresents the student decision-making process and gives a false picture of reasons for withdrawing (Martinez 1995, Kenwright 1996, Hooper *et al* 1999).

In terms of the reasons given by students for withdrawing, the conclusions of a number of different studies are remarkably consistent. Causes of drop-out fall into three broad categories: college-, work- and personal/family-related (Bale 1990, BTEC 1993, CSET Lancaster University 1994, Martinez 1995, Kenwright 1996, Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, Strefford 1999, Adamson and McAleavy 2000, Davies *et al* 2000).

College-related issues

Studies which limit themselves to surveys of withdrawn students can indicate the range of causative factors and can identify those factors that are college related (Bannister 1996, Barrett 1996, North Tyneside College 1997, Adamson *et al* 1998, Gill 1998, Hall and Marsh 1998, Longhurst 1999, Strefford 1999, Adamson and McAleavey 2000, Davies *et al* 2000, Freeman 2000). Depending on the sample size and the degree of sophistication of the research design, this can produce valuable information and insights. However, the absence of control groups of completing and successful students can make it difficult to:

- control and interpret attitudinal data derived from samples of withdrawn students
- understand why the great majority of students complete their programmes
- identify what is making the most difference to completion and withdrawal.

These issues have been addressed in a number of larger scale studies (Medway and Penney 1994, Kenwright 1997, Martinez 1997a, Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998, Responsive College Unit 1998, Davies 1999). These studies show that withdrawn students are most strongly differentiated from completing students by:

- their evaluations of and attitudes towards college-related issues
- lower levels of satisfaction with certain aspects of their experience of college.

Specifically, withdrawn students tend to be less satisfied than completing students with:

- the suitability of their programme of study
- the intrinsic interest of their course
- timetabling issues
- the overall quality of teaching
- help and support received from teachers
- help in preparing to move on to a job or higher qualification.

Withdrawn students are, moreover, less willing than completing students, to recommend the college to others (Medway and Penney 1994, Kenwright 1997, Martinez 1997a, Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998, Davies 1999).

The same studies demonstrate that withdrawn students are not strongly differentiated from completing students by:

- the extent of their satisfaction with college facilities (canteen, toilets, classroom accommodation, equipment, library, workshop accommodation, etc)
- their personal circumstances (the incidence of personal, family or financial difficulties, their travel costs, and ease of their journey to college).

Further, the incidence of financial hardship does not seem to be strongly associated with decisions to drop out in order to gain employment (Martinez and Munday 1998 p29). The Responsive College Unit, with a sample of almost 6000 students, came to virtually identical conclusions using a longitudinal research design (1998). It found, in addition, that neither part-time work nor 'external time commitments' correlated strongly with drop-out.

Research in the Isle of Wight College (Medway and Penney 1994) and research conducted by Davies and colleagues with a large sample of colleges and school sixth forms (Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998) suggests that the same sorts of factors which are closely associated with withdrawal are also associated with unsuccessful completion (where students complete their programme but fail to gain the intended qualification). The earlier study concluded that:

the factors affecting non-completion were the same factors which led to unsuccessful completion. Half of unsuccessful completers would have left before completion if an acceptable alternative opportunity had arisen (Medway and Penney 1994 p36)

Most college researchers have found significant differences between the views of students and staff. With some notable exceptions, staff tend to emphasise those factors associated with student withdrawal over which they feel they have little or no control, including the nature of the student intake, resources and college policies (CSET Lancaster University 1994, Martinez 1995, Kenwright 1996, Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, Gill 1998, Davies *et al* 2000).

Advice and guidance

The more quantitative and larger scale research tends to emphasise the importance of teaching, learning and support processes. The smaller scale, often more qualitative research provides some more detailed findings about these processes. This research points to the importance of information, advice and guidance processes to help place students appropriately on courses. For younger, full-time students, the issue does not appear to be lack of access to advice but rather its quality (Lea 2000). According to Wardman and Stevens (1998 p5):

Most of this group [of withdrawn students] had experienced some elements of careers education, at least one careers interview and had completed at least one career action plan ... the research suggests that there is scope to improve the quality of guidance.

The leading longitudinal study of drop-out found that students who felt well informed about their course were less likely to withdraw (Responsive College Unit 1998). Conversely, studies of withdrawn students have found evidence of:

- poor, inadequate or inappropriate advice and guidance (Medway and Penney 1994, Borrow 1996, McHugh 1996, Brown 1998, Hooper *et al* 1999, Davies *et al* 2000, Little 2000)
- poor advice services for adult and continuing education students (Kenwright 1996, Martinez 1996, Clarke 1997, Vick 1997)
- problems encountered by students who apply late or who join courses after their commencement (Brown 1998, Hall and Marsh 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998)
- poor (not to say hazardous and occasionally negligent) course choice decisions on the part of some students (Foreman-Peck 1999)
- indiscriminate recruitment (Sommerfield 1995)
- insufficient understanding by some students of the demands of their course (eg the balance of practical and classroom work, assessment requirements and the balance of different components of the course) (Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998 pp40–41, Lea 2000).

Teaching and learning

Student withdrawal and unsuccessful completion appear to be associated with a number of different aspects of teaching and learning. In no particular order of priority, these would include:

- uninspiring, 'boring' or poorly structured teaching (Medway and Penney 1994, Borrow 1996, Kenwright 1996, Lamping and Ball 1996, Vick 1997, Martinez and Munday 1998)
- poor group ethos or group dynamics (Borrow 1996, Kenwright 1996, Lamping and Ball 1996, Hall and Marsh 1998, Martinez *et al* 1998, Hooper *et al* 1999)
- poor course organisation in terms of changes to the advertised programme, timetable, rooming or staff, and inadequate liaison within the teaching team (Borrow 1996, Kenwright 1996, Lea 2000)
- inadequate or poor course design (Martinez 1997b, 2000, Martinez and Munday 1998, Holy Cross College 1999, Davies *et al* 2000)
- excessive or poorly scheduled assessment (Borrow 1996, Adamson *et al* 1998, Brown 1998, Hall and Marsh 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998, Wardman and Stevens 1998)
- inappropriate or inadequate induction (Martinez and Munday 1998, Responsive College Unit 1998)
- large gaps in student timetables (Kenwright 1997, Martinez and Munday 1998)
- a mismatch between the largely 'activist' and 'hands-on' learning preferences of students and the more theoretical preferences of some of their teachers (Askham Bryan College 2000, Blaire and Woolhouse 2000).

Value-added research

Value-added research in colleges is based on the exploration of significant relationships between prior attainment at GCSE and subsequent performance at A/AS level. This work is still in its infancy in the sense that the only larger scale studies to date have concentrated on methodological issues, particularly different ways of calculating value-added scores, and consequent implications for the construction of 'league tables' of institutional performance expressed in value-added terms. Some preliminary work has also been undertaken on the relative performance of different types of educational institutions and on the performance of students by gender (O'Donoghue *et al* 1997, Yang and Woodhouse 2000). Some further work explores the relationships between GCSE and GNVQ (Martinez and Rudden 2001). Such studies have not progressed to a consideration of the processes that give rise to the value-added outcomes. Indeed, the only work to date which moves beyond a consideration of patterns of performance to the reasons for such patterns can be found in occasional small-scale studies based on individual A-level subjects (Holy Cross College 1999, Little 2000, Solihull Sixth Form College 2000).

Work-based training

There is a much smaller body of work devoted to work-based training schemes (DfEE 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000). Given the paucity of this research, it is unfortunate that its methods are relatively unsophisticated. All of these reports place great reliance on interview evidence from staff and managers. One of the reports (DfEE 1999c) is based solely on such interviews. Another (DfEE 1999a) is based largely on focus group discussions with just 85 former trainees. A third (DfEE 1999b) includes a telephone survey of some former trainees but its methodological information is so scant (it does not even give the number of telephone interviews) that it is impossible to form any judgement concerning the validity and reliability of its findings. Only the most recent study (DfEE 2000) includes a relatively large survey of non-completers (772 respondents). None of these reports attempts to improve the interpretation of information from withdrawn trainees by making comparisons with evidence drawn from a control group of successful or continuing trainees.

Improving retention and achievement

There is quite a large body of research which offers advice on improving retention and achievement. On examination, some of this literature either has no empirical base or does not make explicit the empirical base which it may have. Since practitioners have a right to know whether 'it really does work', prescriptions for improvement which have not been tried, tested and evaluated in practice have been excluded from this review.

Again, the research on 'what works and why' is dominated by research in colleges. Broadly speaking, the messages from this research are of two sorts:

- messages about the content of improvement strategies
- messages concerning the process of making improvements.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, most of the improvement research assumes a process model of the student experience which extends from initial contact, advice and guidance, to recruitment and selection, student preparation, induction, initial assessment, teaching and assessment, learning support, tutoring and on-programme support, and which ends with progression. The syntheses of college improvement strategies cited above largely agree in their conclusions that colleges can improve by:

- improving and extending advice and guidance services
- recruiting with integrity
- paying particular attention to the early stages of programmes of learning (student induction, initial assessment and the establishment of group ethos and identity)
- establishing a close relationship with students through tutoring which is focused on student progress
- closer monitoring and follow up of poor attendance
- early identification of under-performing students or students who are 'at risk'
- the early diagnosis of student requirements for basic skills and additional learning support and the provision of such support as far as possible within student learning programmes
- the development of a curriculum framework (structure of the college year and college week, balance of teaching and independent learning and appropriate curriculum offer) which is appropriate for a college's intended students

- a variety of mechanisms to maintain or improve student motivation including parental involvement, peer support and prizes and ceremonies
- target setting allied with formative assessment and feedback
- improvements to teaching.

Notwithstanding the general agreement about the sorts of strategies that have been most successful in securing improvements, college researchers have emphasised that there are no 'magic bullets', 'single solutions', 'one best way' or 'golden rules' (Kenwright 1997, Martinez 2000, 2001, Cousin 2001).

Process of college improvement

Common features of college improvement processes seem to include:

- a commitment to 'put students first'
- proactive leadership which focuses on student success and which seeks to engage and motivate staff
- effective and self-critical teaching teams
- a substantial investment in and commitment to professional development
- a strong orientation towards research in general and action research in particular
- well developed and mature management information and quality assurance systems which command the respect of their users (Martinez *et al* 1998, Martinez 2000, 2001, Cousin 2001).

Beyond these generalisations, the processes by which colleges improve are almost as varied as the ways in which they improve. Improvement strategies can be top-down, bottom-up or shared. They can be led by a variety of different postholders, from teachers and team leaders to student services managers, to quality assurance directors, to principals and deputy principals. Indeed, 'the way that strategies to raise achievement are inspired, researched, designed, implemented and evaluated varies considerably from college to college and even within the same college' (Martinez 2000 p90).

A description of available research on retention and achievement

There is a substantial volume of research on retention and achievement in colleges, but researchers and practitioners may have to look quite hard to discover it. This is because most of it is not published at all or exists in the 'grey' literature of unpublished research dissertations and presentations and papers at conferences.

For ease of reference, the available research is discussed in two broad categories:

- research within individual institutions
- research covering a number of institutions.

Research within individual institutions

This is by far the largest category of research. It is being generated mainly by individual colleges and adult education services as they attempt to identify the reasons for drop-out and exam failure in order to develop improvement strategies. Because it is usually intended for internal consumption and use, the work is largely unknown and unseen outside the originating institutions.

Institutionally based research takes many and diverse forms but the most common include:

- research undertaken as part of a programme of postgraduate study (MA, MSc, MEd, MBA and, occasionally, DEd)
- surveys of withdrawn students often accompanied by staff surveys
- reports produced for management purposes (typically combining analyses of data and student surveys)
- research commissioned by a college from an external agency.

Notable examples of institutionally based research would include the study of withdrawal among part-time students in Croydon Continuing Education and Training Services (Vick 1997). This study is based on a large survey of withdrawn students, is methodologically sophisticated and recommends a detailed programme of improvements based firmly on the outcomes of the research.

Research at the Isle of Wight College is now several years old (Medway and Penney 1994). It remains useful as one of the first major pieces of institutional research to compare and contrast survey data from continuing students with that derived from students who had withdrawn. It is also of interest as a major piece of qualitative research involving in-depth and relatively unstructured interviews with a large number of withdrawn students.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) provide a study of students in the process of transition from school to college. Their research is based on detailed qualitative research with some 50 students and takes the form of a longitudinal study.

A number of other institutional studies contain interesting methods:

- McHugh (1996) uses college records to investigate quite different patterns of student behaviour in different parts of his college between the initial contact with the college and ultimate placement on courses.
- Vallender (1998) explores demographic issues and constructs a detailed model based on quantitative data from his college to identify students at risk of non-completion.
- Little (2000) provides a departmentally focused study of A-level students and makes use of a qualitative survey and quantitative data. Her discussion of entry criteria, target minimum grades, value added and retention is particularly sensitive.
- Foreman-Peck (1999) contributes a very localised but highly illuminating qualitative piece of research on a small number of withdrawn GNVQ students with a particular emphasis on guidance, recruitment and selection issues.

Other specialised studies have been undertaken on community education (Clarke 1997), programmes at Level 2 (Lea 2000), A-level and GCSE students (Gill 1998), A-level sociology students (Longhurst 1999), engineering students (Sommerfield 1995), foundation level programmes (Brown 1998), adult full-time students (Barrett 1996) and relatively large surveys of current and withdrawn students at two colleges (Martinez 1997a). Examples of more general institution-wide research in the form of both postgraduate dissertations and internal college reports would include Borrow (1996), Crossan (1996), Hall and Marsh (1998), Searle (1998), Hooper *et al* (1999), Stack (1999), Blaire and Woolhouse (2000), Davies *et al* (2000) and Freeman (2000).

One of the largest bodies of institutional research comprises a group of over 160 case studies from English colleges. The case studies present and reflect on the experience of projects to improve achievement and/or retention undertaken as part of the Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) Programme led by the Learning and Skills Development Agency. The case studies are written to a standard format which includes a summary, brief description of context, analysis of identified problems, descriptions of improvement strategies, analysis of outcomes and reflections by way of learning points and recommendations. They are drawn from a wide cross section of colleges. Their content is equally varied. Some strategies have been developed and implemented across a whole college, others are carried out within departments or programme areas and still others are based on individual courses. Case studies from the first and second round of projects can be searched and downloaded from the RQA website (www.rqa.org.uk). Two hundred further case studies will be added to the website over the next 2 years.

The case studies have all the weaknesses and strengths associated with an action research approach. They are empirically based, collaborative ventures led by practitioners and are intended to make a difference in the real world. They are also variable in their method, the rigour of analysis and sometimes the robustness of their data. It is difficult, moreover, to derive generalisations concerning 'good' (still less 'best') practice, transferability to different contexts and, sometimes, cause and effect relationships.

The main strengths of the institutionally based research are that it:

- is firmly based on empirical evidence
- has a strong action and improvement orientation
- usually includes evidence derived directly from learners
- often employs low-cost methods that are capable of wide application.

The main weaknesses are that it:

- is usually quite small scale
- is occasionally naive in its methods
- can show evidence of researcher bias
- is often difficult to access outside or even within the institution
- does not usually contribute to a theoretical base or critical scholarship.

Research covering a number of institutions

There is a growing body of larger scale research based on surveys that can include several thousand students in scores of institutions. This research is usually based on student survey data and is mainly quantitative in its approach.

Three reports resemble each other quite closely and can be reviewed together (Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998, Responsive College Unit (RCU) 1998). Common features include:

- a focus on the causes of non-completion
- extensive student surveys: the largest (Martinez and Munday) including a survey of some 9000 students, the smallest (Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998) some 3400 students
- structured samples of students which include students who remained on their programmes
- detailed statistical analyses
- a sample of students drawn from a wide variety of colleges (and, in the case of Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, schools).

Two of the reports focus exclusively on full-time students (Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, RCU 1998). The third focuses mainly on full-time students but includes older and part-time students. Two of the reports apply confidence tests to the outcomes of their analyses (Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998).

The RCU research (1998) contains an interesting methodological innovation. The 6000 students who took part in the research were interviewed only once in the first few weeks of their programme of study. Their survey responses were later compared with the decisions they had made by the end of their first term: to continue, to transfer to another course or to withdraw from college altogether. This enabled the researchers to produce what is in effect a longitudinal study, thus avoiding the possible problem that student recollections may be coloured by their subsequent experiences.

In passing, a comparison between the FEDA study of GNVQ retention (Davies, Mullaney and Sparkes 1998) and that undertaken by the University of Ulster (Adamson *et al* 1998, Adamson and McAleavy 2000) tends to confirm the advantages of including current and continuing students in research into drop-out in order to interpret the views of withdrawn students with greater certainty.

In terms of more specialist studies, the impact of take-up and non-take-up of basic skills support is reviewed for a relatively large cohort of students (some 2500) by the Basic Skills Agency (1997). Reports by Kenwright (1996, 1997) are based on the work of a collaborative consortium of colleges in North Yorkshire and employ some practical research methods that are readily transferable to other college contexts. The work by McGivney (1996) remains the single most authoritative synthesis of research on adult retention issues. It provides an exhaustive introduction to the many unpublished as well as published monographs and research reports on this subject, down to its date of publication.

Improving retention and achievement

Four reports (Martinez 1996, 2000, 2001 and Cousin 2001) attempt to provide a synthesis of case studies of college strategies that lead to improvements. The first two were based on the work of a number of colleges and adult education services selected from respondents to a relatively simple and straightforward survey. Colleges and adult education services were asked:

- whether they had improved retention
- what evidence was available to demonstrate the improvement
- what monitoring mechanisms had been used
- what were the main learning points that they would make to others.

Responses were checked for consistency and a number of respondents were subsequently invited to present their experience at conferences and seminars. *College improvement* (Martinez 2001) is based on over 80 case studies created by colleges in the first round of RQA development projects. The latest study (Cousin 2001) considers action research as a particularly useful framework for the development of strategies to improve retention and achievement.

The weaknesses of these larger research projects on college improvement are that they:

- rely largely on qualitative judgements: not only on the part of the colleges who undertook the improvements in the first place but also on the part of the author who selected and generalised from this experience
- provide an imperfect sample drawn only from those colleges and adult education services which volunteered to take part
- lack a control group of institutions whose improvement efforts failed
- do not distinguish easily those strategies which had a particularly large impact on retention/achievement and those with a relatively small impact
- suffer from many of the weaknesses of action research identified above, notably difficulties of generalisation and of identifying cause and effect relationships.

Strengths would include:

- a strong focus on improvement and the transfer of successful practice
- a level of detail sufficient to facilitate transfer and replication and to allow practitioners to make their own judgements about transferability
- tentative generalisations concerning practices which were successful, at least in their own context
- some slightly more robust generalisations about managerial and other processes which were associated with improvement activities.



Priorities for future research

This review of research on improving retention and achievement suggests that:

- there is a substantial body of research that is already available
- the research can sometimes be difficult to access because much of it is not in the public domain
- researchers have tended to focus on colleges and on full-time younger learners
- there is an opportunity to develop more robust research by addressing some methodological weaknesses in the research undertaken to date
- there is an interplay between research and policy issues.

This section of the report outlines some priorities which might be inferred from the preceding analysis concerning:

- the focus and scope of future research
- methodological issues
- the relationship between research and policy issues.

The focus and scope of future research

Researchers will, of course, always plead the need for further research. But the preceding discussion does suggest that there are several categories of learner and of provider which have a particularly high research priority.

Among categories of learner, we know relatively little about retention and achievement issues within the large adult learner population who enrol on courses offered within the adult and community learning sector and who comprise some 80% of students at college. Earlier work has suggested that adult learners have quite diverse motivations, prior experiences and attitudes towards their own learning. Future research will need to establish how retention and achievement issues affect different categories of adult learner.

There is almost no research on learners who are accessing Learning and Skills Council funded programmes in work-based learning. Research in this part of the sector will also need to pay close attention to the very diverse categories of providers. Providers of work-based learning extend from very large, national, voluntary and private sector organisations to relatively small and local niche providers. Providers also range from independent training organisations to in-house training divisions or units within companies.

Given the expansion of the learning and skills sector from 2002, there is a need to undertake retention and achievement research in school sixth forms. There is, of course, a very large body of research in schools which typically takes as its focus either 'school effectiveness' or 'school improvement'. Most of this research in secondary schools, however, takes as its focus the whole of the school. Relatively little attention has been paid to sixth forms within such schools. Changes to the school funding methods away from capitation and towards completion and achievement is likely to generate a substantial growth in demand from potential users of such research (school and sixth form managers, teachers, tutors and local education authorities).

Methodological issues

A discussion on methods might seem out of place in a report intended primarily for practitioners. In relation to retention and achievement, however, the chosen research methods have direct implications for the scope and utility of research findings which will be made available to managers, teachers and trainers.

We have seen that one of the main thrusts of retention and achievement research to date:

- seeks to answer the question: why do students drop out or fail to achieve their qualification goals?
- focuses primarily on the student experience
- is inspired by and intimately associated with efforts to improve colleges
- attempts to infer messages about organisational effectiveness through interpretations and evaluations of the student experience driven largely by practitioner concerns (and is often undertaken by practitioners).

The main limitation of this research is that it does not give rise to the ability to make robust like-for-like comparisons between colleges or indeed component parts of colleges. It is not, therefore, possible to identify in a systematic way the variables which colleges control and which distinguish high from low performing colleges, nor to identify the variables which are most critical.

This has implications for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers contemplating the research needs of the new learning and skills sector. Uncertainty remains concerning key processes and variables that providers need to focus on in order to be or indeed become more effective. Specific questions that have yet to be answered include:

- Are the retention and achievement findings to date equally valid for all types of provider, all types of learner and all types of qualification?
- What is the relative weight or importance of the different process variables?
- What characterises an effective or ineffective provider?
- How different are the factors that contribute to effectiveness at course, programme, curriculum area, unit, department, faculty and whole institution level?
- How much do learner support processes (advice and guidance, recruitment and selection, tutoring, financial and welfare services, etc) contribute to provider effectiveness?

The relationship between research and policy issues

The limits of research to date suggest that post-16 researchers need to extend their methods to embrace some of the approaches developed and applied successfully in the school sector. The diversity of providers and of their learner populations and the wide variety of their institutional missions suggests that something akin to the research framework developed within the school effectiveness tradition is required to provide answers to questions outlined above.

Considerations of school research also suggest that, in the learning and skills sector, researchers need to be more willing to engage in discussions of methods. This conclusion actually bears more on policy than on the dispositions of individual researchers. If more methodological discussion and rigour are required, it falls to the sponsors of research to include that requirement in their research programmes.

Value-added methods offer a relatively well tried and tested method that could be extended to enrich research in retention and achievement. More widespread use of value-added methods will depend primarily on two policy decisions: the type of value-added reporting which the DfES plans to introduce in the post-16 sector and the extent to which the DfES (or the LSC) is prepared to support college and school sixth forms in their improvement activity through the provision of value-added data. In this respect, the very detailed staff development manual produced by the Scottish Executive (2000), in both paper and electronic forms, could serve as a model for England.

The brief consideration of the limited circulation of the research which does exist indicates a need to:

- synthesise, summarise and make more widely available the research that has already been completed
- ensure that more unpublished and 'grey' literature enters the public domain.

Again, these are as much policy as research issues. The major sponsors of post-16 research need to commission summaries of available research for intended use by practitioners. With the ready availability of internet publishing, there is really no excuse for so much research to remain inaccessible.

Two apparently technical issues need to be addressed. Each has a mixture of policy and research aspects. In terms of college administrative systems, the current policy which requires colleges to capture and record a single reason for student withdrawal is indefensible. Colleges, and providers in general, need to establish valid ways of identifying any and every reason that might contribute significantly to a learner's decision to abandon a programme of learning. Second, the research and policy communities need to establish a convenient indicator for social deprivation, which is at least as valid as the free school meals indicator used in school research.



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Why do some students in post-compulsory education abandon courses? And why do others not achieve their full potential? What can colleges do to improve student retention and achievement? This report reviews the research done to date.

Research about retention and achievement is examined under headings such as student motivation and decision-making, demographic factors, college-related issues, and advice and guidance. The review refers to previously inaccessible research, including unpublished reports from conferences and internal reports from institutions. In conclusion, priorities for future research and its application are identified.