

LEARNING SKILLS

'Pre-university academic skills provision prevents first year drop out. Discuss'

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Student retention is an issue that affects universities across the UK. Recent figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show in Scotland 9.4% of students dropped out of their university course. This reveals Scotland has the highest proportion of university students dropping out in the UK (Axon,T 2012). Studies have shown that the majority of students who drop out discontinue their studies in first year (Adams, S 1996). These findings indicate that universities need to focus on first year students in order to improve retention. There are many programmes available to students which offer pre-university academic skills provision. These include LEAPS (Lothian Equal Access Programme), GOALS (Greater Opportunity of Access and Learning with Schools) and QMConnect amongst many other programmes. This essay will look at findings to discover if these pre-university courses prevent the first year university drop out rate.

The government and higher education experts are turning to various solutions in order to improve university retention. One of the solutions to help tackle the problem is by introducing pre-university academic provision in the form of various summer schools and university taster courses (Smith, 2003). GOALS is an example of pre-university academic provision which has proven to be effective (McGoldrick, 2005; Kemmer, 2007). GOALS aims to work with pupils from schools with low university participation rates helping students from lower socio-economic groups looking to enter higher education. They aim to develop academic and social skills in order for the pupils to make a successful transition from school to university. Aiming these courses at pupils from disadvantaged schools is fundamental in lowering first year drop out rates as findings show that students from a lower socio-economic group are more likely to drop out of university (Powdthavee et al, 2009). As part of the GOALS programme, University of Glasgow offer a 'Top-up Programme'. This

offers academic skills provision preparing potential university students for the transition to university. Research showed '74% of pupils that attended under-represented schools and took part in the Top-Up programme passed their first year course' (Browitt et al, 2007). This evidence proves that pre-university academic skills provision, in the case of the Top-Up Programme, is successful in improving first year pass rates therefore improving retention of first year students. Furthermore findings from a University of Glasgow report, found that students from GOALS eligible schools who had taken part in the Top-Up Programme were less likely to drop out from university compared with students from the same schools who had not participated in the programme (Whittaker, 2008). This shows that that providing potential university students with pre-university academic provision does prevent first year drop out.

However, it is not necessarily a lack of academic skills that pushes students to drop out of university. Findings from the WhatWorks? Programme showed that 'feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in' (Thomas, 2012) was one of the primary reasons students contemplated dropping out. This 'feeling of isolation' is something that no academic skills provision course can directly prevent hence pre-university academic skills provision cannot prevent first year drop out for every student. There is a concern that going from school or college where pastoral care is promoted widely, offering support at every opportunity, to going to university where a student has to seek help can prove too much for many students. 'Many students who withdraw from courses express a desire to stay in Higher Education, indicating that they may have benefited from appropriate, early academic and personal support' (Rickinson et al, 1995). Rickinson et al suggests universities may have to improve their pastoral care system in order to retain their first year students who are

experiencing personal issues. Universities have taken this onboard and are improving pastoral care services. An example of this is Queen Margret University's QMConnect mentoring project. This is a programme in which first year students are paired with students further on in their degree who become their 'mentors'. Evaluation of this programme showed that 'mentees felt well supported' and 'most felt they had integrated well into the student community' (Whittaker, 2008). If students feel as if they have integrated well, they are less likely to drop out. Hence programmes such as QMConnect help prevent first year drop out. In addition pre-university courses such as Glasgow Caledonian University's 'Passion for Fashion' allowed students to interact with students from different schools and backgrounds, giving experience of meeting new people, improving social skills and ultimately 'supporting social transition onto a degree programme' (Whittaker, 2008). It is not just the 'Passion for Fashion' course which allows pupils to interact with new people. All of the pre-university courses bring together people from different backgrounds. This allows potential students to experience meeting new people, just as they would starting first year university. Although social skills are not blatantly taught - compared with academic skills - these courses will undoubtedly enhance the social skills of the majority of students. Hence first year drop out due to social issues will be prevented.

In addition to these 'social issues', other reasons for first year drop out found included; 'academic issues and concern about achieving future aspirations' (Thomas, 2012). Academic skills provision can help prevent these problems effectively. Dr Benskee states, 'preparation programmes are designed to improve the retention and progression of non-traditional students as well as to raise their aspiration and familiarise them with Higher Education Institutions' (Benskee, 2008). By learning academic skills before progressing to university, students will feel more confident

about tackling the academic challenges of first year university. Many first year university students who do not participate in pre-university academic skills provision find the academic demands of university challenging. 'There is a concern that A-levels are too narrow a preparation for the demands with little or no emphasis on teamwork or independence of approach' (Roberts et al, 1992). This view that high school qualifications are inadequate preparation for first year university is the view taken by many first year students and higher education experts. Pre-university academic skills provision, which gives an insight into university level work, is beneficial to prepare undergraduate students for university (Benskee, 2008). It provides the academic skills required to succeed at university, which high school qualifications fail to. A University of Glasgow report found that 'inaccurate expectations' was a primary cause of drop out and that 'pre-entry preparation programmes would improve retention' (Browitt et Al, 2007). This is the reason why many universities themselves are carrying out their own 'preparation programmes'.

An example of a university's own pre-university academic provision is the 'First Steps to Nursing' course offered at the University of the West of Scotland. This part course is aimed at students who do not meet the entry requirements but are determined to pursue a nursing degree. Aimed at mature students, this course looks at improving IT skills, as well as developing written and oral skills. At Napier University, they offer a similar course, however it is integrated into first year study as an additional module. The 'Issues in Social Care and Health' module 'provides greater emphasis on adult learning, student transition into a HEI setting and student engagement' (Whittaker, 2008). Since introducing this module, Napier has recorded a 1.6% failure rate compared with a 13.5% failure rate with the old module assessment tool. This has 'enabled students to succeed early on their course – an

important retention challenge' (Whittaker, 2008). If students achieve good grades at in the early stages of a university course, it gives confidence and lowers the chance of a student dropping out.

At first glance it would appear that pre-academic skills provision prevents first year drop out for those who withdraw due to not coping with the academic demands of university. However when all evidence for first year university drop out is studied, it shows that other social factors such as isolation are also reasons for first year university drop out. Again, at first glance, pre-university academic provision would appear to only tackle academic problems, but by studying the evidence it shows that these courses, although not always directly teaching how to deal with 'social issues', *do* improve students social skills essential for university. In conclusion, with improved social skills, academic skills and a clear expectation of the demands of first year university gained from pre-university academic provision, students are less likely to drop out of university. Therefore this shows that pre-university academic skills provision does prevent the majority of first year students from dropping out.

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