

<b>Institution:</b> Edge Hill University
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 25 – Education
<b>Title of case study:</b> Improving equity and outcomes in higher education
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The impact is on student equity, retention and success in higher education (HE). The research has informed national policies: Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Office for Fair Access (OFFA), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Cabinet Office, Quality Assurance Agency and the National Union of Students. Findings have influenced institutional policy and practice: 190 examples of how the conceptual framework generated as part of the research has been applied, and the impact of the interventions; 14 institutions are engaged in a three year change programme (2012/13-2014/15) to implement the findings, impacting on 42 programmes and 4453 level 4 students per year.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The key findings of this research (undertaken by Professor Thomas at Edge Hill since 2008) are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Student engagement and belonging improve student retention and success in HE. Belonging is the outcome of: (a) supportive peer relations; (b) meaningful interaction between staff and students; (c) developing students' knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; and (d) offering an HE experience which is relevant to students' current interests and future goals. Students are most likely to feel that they belong to their programme, with a sense of belonging generally decreasing at departmental, school and institutional levels. Thus, academic programmes should be the primary focus for effective student retention and success. A set of characteristics of effective practice to improve engagement, belonging, retention and success are identified. (Thomas 2012).</li> <li>2) Engagement and belonging are most effectively nurtured through universal activities delivered through the academic curriculum. Many students do not utilise separate/central academic development and pastoral support services (Woodfield and Thomas 2012). This requires inclusive and active learning &amp; teaching, and a partnership approach to providing access to professional services/support and social interaction and engagement. Effective strategies include an academically relevant induction to co-construct understanding rather than transmit information; active student-centred learning using group work, problem-based learning, field trips and real-world learning; co-curricular academic development and support (Thomas 2012).</li> <li>3) Changing pedagogy, curriculum and student services requires a change in institutional culture, policies and processes to support academic and professional staff to work differently and collaboratively (Thomas 2011). A number of strategic implications for institutions identified in Thomas 2012 are being explored in current research within the Faculty: institutional commitment through leadership and documentation; retention and success identified as a priority for all staff; developing staff capacity through accountability, recognition, support and development and reward; developing student capacity to engage; making use of high quality institutional data; monitoring student behaviour and taking action when 'at risk' behaviour is observed; and implementing change in partnership with staff and students.</li> <li>4) National funding and policies contribute to changing institutional priorities, cultures and improving student retention, completion and success. This has been found in England and internationally (Bowes et al 2012, 2013a, 2013b).</li> <li>5) The contribution of student financial support to retention and success is ambiguous (Bowes et al 2013b), and indications from the formative evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme in England are of little or no impact (Bowes et al 2012-13).</li> </ol> <p>The research outcomes are from six externally and one internally funded projects. Thomas (2012) presents a conceptual model, exploration of the evidence, implications for policy and practice and evidence-informed practice case studies. This is based on meta-analysis and synthesising evidence from seven projects (involving 22 HEIs), which were overseen by Thomas 2008-11. Thomas was employed as Professor of HE at Edge Hill from April 2007, where she remains. Institutional Research Development Funding was used to further explore the issue of <i>Institutional transformation to engage a diverse student body</i> (Thomas and Tight 2011). International case studies explored institutional experiences of attracting, recruiting, retaining and maximising the outcomes of students from</p>

traditionally under-represented groups. Thomas (2011) analyses the factors that enabled and inhibited institutional change in the 21 case study institutions.

External funding has been secured collaboratively by the UoA from HEFCE (NSP 2011-14; and two projects in 2012-13 to inform the National Strategy for Access and Student Success), the Equality Challenge Unit (the use and uptake of student services 2009-10) and the Office for Fair Access (2013) to explore elements of student engagement and institutional responses to diversity.

### 3. References to the research

All items available on request.

Report: Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Available: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/retention/what\\_works\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/retention/what_works_final_report.pdf)

Contributes to findings **1, 2 & 3**. The *What works? Student retention and success in HE*, 2008-11 was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) and HEFCE, and overseen by an external Steering Group chaired by Professor Patricia Broadfoot, University of Bristol. The project reports were rigorously peer reviewed and revised to maximise the quality of the outputs; the findings were tested with external groups; and the project reports and the final report was scrutinised by the Steering Groups and HEFCE. The Cabinet Office (2012) *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility*. A progress report by the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty refers to this research as providing an 'excellent evidence base' (p61). The output presents a conceptual model, was based on meta-analysis and synthesises evidence from seven projects (involving 22 HEIs).

Report: Woodfield, R. and Thomas, L (2012) *Male students: Engagement with academic and pastoral support services*. London: Equality Challenge Unit.

Available: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/files/male-students-engagement-with-academic-and-pastoral-support-services.pdf/view> Contributes to finding **2**. The research was funded by the Equality Challenge Unit, and overseen by a sector-wide Advisory Group convened by ECU. The research took place in seven sites and analysed survey responses from 4053 students, and five male and five female focus groups. The report was revised based on extensive feedback from the Advisory Group to clarify or test findings.

Chapter in Book: Thomas, L. (2011) 'Enabling institutional transformation to engage a diverse student body: Necessary conditions and facilitating factors', in Thomas, L. and Tight, M. (eds.) *Institutional transformation to engage a diverse student body*. Bingley: Emerald Books. Contributes to finding **3**.

The research project *Embedding widening participation in higher education institutions*, was funded by Edge Hill University, Research Development Fund. Findings were reviewed at a conference, and the case studies and chapters were peer reviewed and revised by the authors.

Reports: Bowes, L., Jones, S., Thomas, L., Moreton, R., Birkin, G. and Nathwani, T. (2012) *The Uses and Impact of HEFCE Funding for Widening Participation*. Bristol: HEFCE; Available: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2013/wpusesimpact/>

Bowes, L., Thomas, L., Peck, L., Moreton, R. and Birkin, G. (2013a) *The uses and impact of access agreements and associated spend*. Bristol: OFFA; Bowes, L., Thomas, L., Peck, L. and Nathwani, T. (2013b) *International Research on the Effectiveness of Widening Participation*. Bristol: HEFCE and OFFA. Contributes to findings **4 & 5**.

Research commissioned to inform the National Strategy for Widening Access and Student Success (2012 and 2013a) involved sector-wide surveys, and case study research. International research was undertaken by experts from each country, supplemented by international discussions of the findings. The reports were reviewed by the research team, and clarification sought. All reports were critically reviewed by the commissioning organisations.

Report: Bowes et al (2012) *Formative evaluation of the national scholarship programme, 2011-15*. HEFCE. Available: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2012/nspevaluation/> Contributes to finding **5**.

The research is overseen by HEFCE and an external cross-sector advisory group chaired by Prof Madeleine Atkins, until 09/13 and subsequently Prof Anthony Forster. The evaluation has involved surveys of student recipients and institutions, focus groups with students, a panel of potential students and interviews with institutional staff.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Much of the research was commissioned through competitive processes by national bodies, providing direct access to policy makers through the advisory groups and reporting processes. The PHF/HEFCE funded project distributed twice-yearly electronic briefings to 500 subscribers, and involved consultative sessions with senior institutional leaders to ensure the final messages were communicated effectively to this group. Throughout the assessment period Thomas delivered keynote addresses and interactive sessions at national conferences and institutional events, using research evidence, the conceptual model, examples of practice and student case studies to engage staff in thinking about applying the learning. These invitations allowed Thomas to synthesise findings from across the studies and maximise the impact on national and institutional policy and practice. The following impacts arose between 2008 and July 2013.

*Impact on national policy making: Recognition of the importance of student engagement and belonging through learning and teaching to improve student retention and success and that this is shaped by the institutional culture and supported national policies and funding; limited contribution of student financial support.* The research evidence has been used directly to inform the work of HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access, being extensively cited in the National Strategy for Access and Student Support Interim report. Paragraphs 73-77 draw on Bowes et al 2012 to identify importance of the institutional culture and the contribution of national policies and funding. Paragraphs 158-160 identify the limited impact of the National Scholarship Programme, and the changes made to date in response to our research findings. Paragraphs 181-184, 188, 189, 192, 195, 196 cite the importance of a sense of belonging, and inclusive learning and teaching drawing on Thomas 2012. Thomas was invited to each of the thematic roundtable discussions listed in paragraph 220. The research commissioned and published in 2013 will inform the National Strategy due for publication in autumn 2013.

The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) used the research evidence in their guidance for institutions about including retention and success in Access Agreements: 'You are free to design your own retention work... You will want to build on what works best, taking into account the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee reports on retention and HEFCE's subsequent work with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Action on Access' (OFFA, 2012, p19).

HEFCW has drawn on the research through: a conference (2010, Llandrindod Wells); a publication (Thomas and Jamieson-Ball 2011) and guidance and analysis of institutional Widening Access policies: include a focus on 'student learning, success and retention interventions which are underpinned by robust data collection and analysis to improve performance and deliver improvement' and embed programmes of continuous engagement, rather than large-scale, 'one-off' interventions' (see HEFCW, appendix B, \$17 and \$19, p12, previously the emphasis had been on widening access interventions, rather than on institutional change to support retention as well as access).

The National Union of Students (NUS) promoted the research to Students Unions (NUS 2011, Thomas in NUS 2010 and an extended article on the website) about the contribution of proactive and structured personal tutoring to improve engagement, belonging, retention and success. The research also informed the development of the NUS charters on personal tutoring and academic support. The findings have also been endorsed by Universities UK (in Thomas 2012a) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2012).

*Impact on institutions: Policy and practice.* Institutional staff have directly engaged with the *What works? Student retention and success* research: Approximately 40 senior managers from UK HEIs attended presentations about the research findings at the HEFCE Widening Access and Participation Strategic Committee, the Action on Access Forum and two lunchtime events organised for PVCs by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. 500 people are members of the Retention and Success JISC mail list set up as part of this project. 387 people have attended the two *What Works?* conferences (2010 and 2012). Feedback evidence collected by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to explore impact of the 2012 conference demonstrate people's intentions to apply the learning to their own practice and that of their institutions: 80% agreed that 'As a consequence of attending this event I intend to change my practice'; specifically, participants signalled intentions to take a more strategic approach to retention and success, engage senior managers in change and disseminate implications for practice to colleagues. Conferences and publications demonstrate how institutions have applied the *What works* model to their own practice: Programme briefing number 6 (Action on Access 2011) identified 24 examples from institutions across the UK. The Compendium of Effective Practice (Andrews et al 2012) includes 31 examples from institutions about the application of the model and the impact on

retention and success. A second edition has been published with 50 further examples from the UK and abroad (Andrews, Clark and Thomas 2013). A Welsh publication includes 15 examples from Wales (Thomas and Jamieson-Ball 2011). At the final conference 70 institutions presented evidence from projects influenced by the *What works* programme.

The Paul Hamlyn Foundation has provided additional funding for institutions to participate in a Student retention and success change programme, led by the HEA. This programme is directly informed by Thomas 2012, and institutions are required to implement institutional level changes and to work with three academic programmes to implement change relating to induction, active learning and teaching or co-curricular activities (personal tutoring or peer mentoring). Thirty-two institutions expressed an interest in participating in the change programme, which works with institutions to implement the research findings. 16 institutions (from across the UK and spanning all mission groups) were selected to participate in the Change Programme [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/change/SRS\\_12-13/SRS\\_info](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/change/SRS_12-13/SRS_info). Each institution has agreed to participate fully in the evaluation, providing institutional data, and has paid £3,600. Both demonstrate commitment to change. It is anticipated that 13 institutions will be permitted to continue into the second and third year of the funded programme. Continuation is subject to institutional commitment to the programme including well-developed and achievable plans in line with Thomas 2012 findings, full-participation in the evaluation and attendance at the events.

Thomas engages with academic members of staff and departments. In January 2013 she provided the key input (report and address) into the STEM Learning and Teaching Summit. In December 2012 she facilitated a workshop for 12 teaching staff in the discipline of the Built Environment. In November 2012 she contributed to a workshop organised by the Deans of Health and attended by 30 academics and managers in health and social care disciplines.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

### Factual Statements

Statement 1: Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, Office for Fair Access (impact on OFFA policy and guidance). Statement 2: Chief Executive, The Higher Education Academy (impact on policy and practice, including change programme). Statement 3: Head of Quality and Student Engagement, National Union of Students (impact on policy and practice, NUS charters).

### Other Sources

- 1) *Compendium of effective practice in higher education retention and success*, vols. 1 and 2. Provides 80 examples of institutions applying the What works? conceptual model to their practice and evidence of impact - published by the Higher Education Academy. Available from [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/what-works-student-retention/Compendium\\_Effective\\_Practice](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/what-works-student-retention/Compendium_Effective_Practice)
- 2) National Strategy for Access and Student Success. The interim report prepared January 2013 and submitted to Ministers March 2013 makes substantial reference to the research discussed above: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/currentworktowidenparticipation/natstrat/>. Research to inform the final version of the National Strategy is listed here: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/currentworktowidenparticipation/natstrat/research/>
- 3) HEFCW W11/17HE (2012) *Learning and Teaching and Widening Access Strategies 2011/12 to 2013/14: Supplementary Guidance*. Cardiff: HEFCW
- 4) Endorsement from the National Union of Students: NUS (2012) Briefing on retention <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/news/article/highereducation/Briefing-on-retention/> and NUS (2010) Personal tutors, HE Focus vol. 6, *Can you afford not to have a personal tutoring system?* p8, and an extended article, both available from <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/learning-and-teaching-hub/personaltutors/>
- 5) Thomas, L. and Jamieson-Ball, C. (eds) (2011) *Engaging students to improve student retention and success in higher education in Wales*. York: HEA [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/retention/EngagingStudentsToImproveRetention\\_final\\_English.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/inclusion/retention/EngagingStudentsToImproveRetention_final_English.pdf)