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Promoting Student Retention in two FE Colleges

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Abstract

The central question of this thesis is: How effective are strategies aimed at promoting student retention in Further Education (FE) colleges? Much research has been carried out into the causes of poor student retention in further and higher education, highlighting the multi-faceted nature of student drop-out. Non-completion is typically the result of combinations of risk factors, including demographic characteristics, financial constraints, students' motivation, type of course, and students' experiences of education. Therefore the 'risk factors' for students not completing courses vary in the degree to which they are within the control of colleges. While some researchers have made recommendations for improving student retention, a notable gap in the literature is research into the effectiveness of the existing strategies for improving student retention. It is this gap to which the thesis is addressed and seeks to contribute new knowledge.

Focussing on Business courses in two similar but contrasting London colleges, this research explores students' and staff views on the existing retention strategies and their implementation. This is done through a range of methods, including questionnaire surveys involving a total of 419 students; interviews and a focus group with students; interviews with college managers and teachers; and classroom observations of a sample of teaching sessions. A central finding is that both students and staff highlighted strategies centred on motivation and teaching and learning as the most important for improving retention. These were also the strategies that were seen as being most effectively implemented, whereas strategies linked to student support services, the college environment and quality assurance processes were seen as being least effectively implemented. Students' views were different however, with level 3 students and Black students most likely to rate the implementation of retention strategies favourably. These differences were more significant than differences between the two colleges studied. It is recommended that retention strategies that sort, support, connect and transform (cf. Beatty-Guenter, 1994) should be implemented in a more co-ordinated fashion that places teaching and learning at the centre and focuses on groups of students most at risk of dropping out, with more good practice sharing between colleges. An important recommendation from the findings is that differences between level 2 and level 3 students, and also between students from different ethnic backgrounds, point to the importance of targeting strategies on those groups most at risk of dropping out.

Chapter 1

Context

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis examines the issue of student retention in relation to level 2 and 3 courses within the Business departments of two London Further Education (FE) colleges, looking specifically at the effectiveness of different strategies for improving retention. A notable gap in the literature on student retention is research into the effectiveness of strategies for improving student retention. It is this gap to which the thesis is addressed and seeks to contribute new knowledge.

This context-setting chapter provides an overview of the main issues around student retention in FE and describe the two colleges in which the research was conducted and the strategies they were implementing to improve retention. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the reasons students give for early withdrawal and considers strategies that have been recommended for improving student retention. Chapter 3 sets out the research methodology used to investigate the effectiveness of different retention strategies in the two FE colleges studied.

The findings from my primary research are presented in Chapters 4 and 5, using data from investigations with the staff and students in the two colleges. Chapter 4 focuses on two central questions: (a) which strategies did students think were most important for retaining them on their programme of study?; and

(b) how effectively were these different strategies being implemented? Chapter 5 presents staff views and data from classroom observations of teaching and learning. The implications of these findings are discussed in Chapter 6, together with recommendations for how strategies to improve student retention could be more effectively implemented.

The Issue of Student Retention

For the purpose of this study, 'poor retention' indicates an early withdrawal from courses, or dropout by students. This includes students who do not complete the programme of study for which they originally enrolled because they change courses and those who leave the college entirely. Non-completion encompasses all students who fail to complete their courses or programmes of study, irrespective of their reasons (e.g. it includes those students who leave because of a change in employment and those who change courses). Evidence from research and my own professional experience indicates that students may be 'retained' for varying lengths of time (DfEE, 1995). Furthermore, some of those retained may not achieve their qualification aim - particularly among students in inner city colleges (FEDA, 1999). Successful completion refers to students who complete their courses or programmes, even if they do not achieve their qualification aims (Martinez, 1997a).

More research has been carried out into student retention in Higher Education (HE) institutions than in the FE sector, although HE in England faces less of a problem with retention (Hall, 2001) - although retention rates have been found to vary markedly between universities (MacLeod, 2002). However, compared to other countries, 'the UK as a whole does relatively well in the numbers of students it retains within its higher education system to successful completion of their degrees... The UK has one of the highest graduation rates amongst the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Fewer students leave prematurely and fewer fail to graduate than elsewhere' (Hall, 2001:5-6). The National Audit Office has described the statistics for HE as 'very impressive' (NAO, 2002:10). However, student retention has been more of an issue in the FE sector. The problem received official recognition in 1993 with the publication of an influential report by the Audit Commission and Ofsted entitled *Unfinished Business* (Audit Commission & Ofsted, 1993), which highlighted that rates of non-completion in FE averaged 13 per cent for A-level courses and 18 per cent for vocational courses – but in some institutions rates were thought to have been as high as 80 per cent.

The issue of student retention is of importance to all involved in FE. Evidence from Ofsted inspections has shown that poor rates of student retention are a characteristic of failing colleges (Ofsted, 2004a), whereas successful colleges have good retention rates (Ofsted, 2004b). If retention rates are low then this lowers success rates that is the rate at which students successfully attain the qualifications they have enrolled for. Student retention is also important because it is a starting point for strategies to widen participation – research shows that rates of non-completion are not the same for all groups of students (e.g. IFF Research Ltd, 2000; McDougall, 2001; McGivney's, 1996a; Martinez, 1997a; Martinez and Munday, 1998), making this an important inclusion issue. The changing context in which FE colleges operate has also seen colleges come under increasing financial pressure to address the problem of student retention.

Retention in the FE Context

The issue of student retention in FE really came to prominence following the incorporation of colleges, after the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act saw colleges move out of local authority control (Hemsley-Brown, 2002). While this reform brought much greater independence for colleges, it also brought them within a common national funding system under the auspices of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The FEFC funding methodology introduced the concept of funding 'units of activity', which were used to equalise levels of funding across the sector, lower costs and drive expansion (Spours & Lucas, 1996). Thus, 'The basic purpose of the funding mechanism was to focus on recruitment, growth and course retention' (Leney *et al*, 1998:4).

Under the FEFC, colleges came under increasing pressure to make better use of management information and to develop targets as a way to improve the quality of their provision and to raise standards (FEFC, 2001). Using data from Individualised Student Records, the FEFC published national figures on the performance of colleges against key performance indicators, enabling colleges to compare their performance against equivalent institutions, as well as providing a form of public accountability and allowing changes in performance to be monitored over time (FEFC, 1999). These performance indicators included a measure of student retention, referred to as 'student in-year retention', which took account of transfers between qualifications (thereby providing a more accurate measure of retention *at the college level* than simple rates of course completion). Combined with the funding pressures that colleges were under, these developments meant that 'some colleges will be asked ever more pointed questions as to why – given apparently similar student profiles – their retention and achievement rates are less good than other colleges' (Martinez, 1997a:10).

In 2001 the FEFC was replaced by a newly-formed planning and funding body for post-16 education and training (outside HE), the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). The LSC placed a central emphasis on raising quality and standards in the sector, which has included the continued publication of national 'benchmarking' data for FE colleges. This was seen as allowing 'colleges to assess their performance and assists their planning of action to improve the retention and achievement rates of their students' (LSC, 2001:1). The LSC's benchmarking data reports college retention rates in much more detail than was the case under the FEFC. Whereas the FEFC had concentrated on overall retention rates for all full-time students in FE colleges, the LSC data on retention and achievement is broken down according to course length (between long and short courses), age group (distinguishing between 16-18 year olds and those aged 19 plus) and qualification level (separating out data for level 1, level 2 and level 3 qualifications). As the FEFC had done, data are also broken down according to type of college (General FE and Tertiary Colleges, Sixth Form Colleges and Tertiary Colleges).

Changes in the reporting of national FE data on retention make it harder to ascertain trends over time, although the move towards providing a more detailed breakdown of national level data promises to bring greater insight into the issue (provided that the measures are kept stable and are not subjected to further changes). The data that is available shows that the overall (median) retention rate of full-time FE students remained constant at 87 per cent from 1995-96 to 1997-98 (FEFC, 1999:18), but that Sixth Form Colleges performed better (with 91% per cent in-year retention) than General FE / Tertiary Colleges (85 per cent in-year retention).

The first retention figures published by the LSC, for the period 1997-98 to 1999-2000, showed a continued trend of stability in overall retention rates – at around 79 per cent for long qualifications and 92 per cent for short qualifications (i.e. those lasting less than 24 weeks) (LSC, 2001:2). For long qualifications at levels 2 and 3, which are the main focus of this thesis, mean retention rates in all colleges for 1999-2000 were just under 80 per cent (78 per cent for 16-18 year olds and 19+ students on level 2 courses, 78 per cent for 16-18 year olds on level 3 courses, and 79 per cent for 19+ students) (LSC, 2001:15). Therefore, nationally, one in five students enrolled were not completing these types of courses.

Between 1999-2000 and 2001-02 retention rates showed slight increases across the board, for those aged 16-18 and 19 plus, for long and short courses and across all types of FE colleges. The greatest increases were in the retention rates of Sixth Form Colleges and for long level 3 qualifications (LSC, 2003a:5). However, overall retention rates (across all types of colleges) remained at around the 80 per cent mark for long courses.

The more detailed attention paid by the LSC to retention and achievement data reflects its emphasis on integrating planning and funding decisions with college performance against key performance indicators. Under the LSC's business planning cycle, college plans are annually reviewed and approved before funding is allocated (LSC, 2004), making it increasingly important for colleges that they constantly seek to improve their rates of retention and achievement. Colleges not only have this external funding incentive to improve student retention, but must increasingly focus on their retention and achievement figures as part of a wider movement towards greater self-assessment and self-improvement (DfES, 2006; Foster, 2005; LSC, 2003b & 2005a; QIA, 2007). Within this context the issue of student retention appears to be a higher priority than ever for FE colleges.

The importance of student withdrawal is, of course, not only of significance for FE colleges. It is also an important human issue for the individuals affected, because 'Students who withdraw can incur considerable financial, personal and social costs' (McGivney, 1996a:11). As well as sometimes causing individuals to lose out financially (e.g. where course costs have been paid), withdrawal from a course can lower confidence and self-esteem – and if the student had previously had negative experiences of education at school then 'this may reinforce earlier feelings of inadequacy and failure' (ibid:13). However, in some circumstances withdrawal from a course can also represent a positive choice that is beneficial for the individual (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000).

Student Retention in College A and College B

This study investigates issues concerning the retention of students in FE colleges, taking as case studies the Business departments of two colleges, referred to here as 'College A' and 'College B'. The research aims to investigate the extent to which these two colleges are effectively implementing strategies designed to improve student retention. The rationale for choosing these two colleges for the study was to look at retention in two similar but different contexts. There were three main similarities between the two sites chosen. Firstly, the two colleges are based in the same part of London, serving an economically deprived area with a largely Black and Asian population. Secondly, the retention rates in the two colleges were very similar. Thirdly, similar courses were chosen – Level 2 and 3 Business Studies courses. However, the two institutions are very different in size and character, presenting the opportunity to explore different approaches to improving retention with similar groups of students. Even taking all these points into account, there was an element of pragmatism in selecting these two colleges (particularly in relation to the dual considerations of ease of access and of gaining permission to study in the two colleges).

The key characteristics of College A and College B are summarised in table 1.1 below, which is followed by more detailed descriptions of the two colleges, the picture of student retention within each college and the main strategies deployed to improve retention.

Table 1.1 – Characteristics of College A and College B

College A	**College B**
General FE College	Sixth Form College
Multi-site	Single-site
24,000 students (approx)	1,800 students (approx)
Offers extensive provision at level 2 and below, extending up to HE	Offers mainly level 3 courses
Mix of 16-18 year olds, adults and a small number of 14-16 year olds	Vast majority of students aged 16-18
63% of students from minority ethnic groups	60%+ from minority ethnic groups
College retention rates 'generally above national averages'	College retention rates 'generally above those of similar colleges... but still below the national average'
Average retention rate across Business courses of 87% over the last 3 years	Average retention rates in Business over the last 3 years of 89% (level 2) and 91% (level 3)

College A

College A is one of the largest general FE colleges in England. The college offers a very wide range of learning opportunities for students aged 14 to 19 and adults from entry level to level 3. There is also a significant HE provision. The college has two main campus sites and in addition there are a number of local, neighbourhood and specialist learning centres, many of which are integrated with other community and business functions. The college has three Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) and a number of learndirect learning centres in the locality. The college is also one of the largest work-based learning providers in the area. The community which the college serves is one of the most deprived boroughs in England. The prior educational achievements of College A's student intake are significantly below the national average.

The college operates an open-access admissions policy, offers extensive provision at level 2 and below, and has developed a distinctive unitised curriculum. In 2003/04, there were over 24,000 individual students enrolled. Over 75 per cent of these students lived in areas of high social and economic deprivation and 63 per cent were from minority ethnic groups. The College A Learning System Review report (2007) indicates that 24 per cent of students on level 2 and 3 courses were in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance. Students following entry and Foundation level courses accounted for two thirds of all students. There were approximately 3,800 full-time students, around 58 per cent of whom were adults (aged 19+), 41 per cent were aged 16 to 18 and 2 per cent were 14 to 16 year olds. The college's mission is to provide inclusive learning for local communities by customising learning to meet individual, business and community needs; by offering learning that enables success and progression for all; and by stimulating and responding to demand.

In the most recent inspection of College A, in 2004, inspectors judged the provision to be good in six curriculum areas and satisfactory in five curriculum areas. The inspection identified the college's key strengths as being: highly effective strategic leadership and governance; outstanding educational and social inclusion; outstanding range of effective partnerships and collaborative working arrangements; innovative development of a credit framework curriculum based on unit accreditation; effective open-access admissions policy; good student support systems; significant contributors to local regeneration; improving retention and pass rates in most curriculum areas; and good accommodation and learning resources.

The following were identified by the inspectors as areas for improvement in College A: retention and pass rates on some long courses; student punctuality and attendance; overcrowding in some classrooms; proportion of teaching and learning that is good or better; effective use of information and learning technology in lessons; effectiveness of quality assurance arrangements in some areas; use of targets for individual students in literacy, numeracy and ESOL; teaching standards of staff supplied by third-party providers; and aspects of work-based learning.

Retention on Business courses in College A

College monitoring data show that retention rates for all Business courses in College A averaged 87 percent over the last three years (2003-4 to 2005-6). In 2003-4 the retention rate for these courses was 89 percent, rising by two percentage points the following year to 91 percent. However, there was a sharp drop in 2005-6 to 81 percent completion. This drop occurred at a time of financial difficulties for the college, which led to restructuring and the resultant loss of management and lecturing posts within the Business department. The consequences of this restructuring during the middle of the academic year were that some unprofitable courses were closed down, and other courses were merged. During this turbulent period many more students than normal dropped out. As an 'insider' working in the college at the time, I observed that some students left because the course they had originally enrolled for no longer existed. Other students withdrew because they no longer had the teachers they were familiar with and, in some cases, the sudden timetable changes (to accommodate transfers and the merger of courses) resulted in some students becoming demotivated. From speaking to students it was apparent that some had chosen to leave College A but were not being lost to FE altogether, as several had chosen to go to other colleges to finish their courses. These sudden changes in the Business area appear to be the main reason behind the 9 percentage point drop in retention that occurred during this year.

College B

College B is a Sixth Form College situated in one of the Greater London Boroughs. It offers a wide range of academic and general vocational courses to its students, the vast majority of whom are aged 16 to 18 and study full-time. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups (at over 60 per cent) is much higher than that of the local community (36 per cent): 18 per cent of the students at College B are Black African, 12 per cent are Black Caribbean, 18 per cent are Pakistani, 7 per cent are Indian and 5 per cent are Bangladeshi. The college has a high proportion of learners living in areas with a high level of deprivation and approximately 52 percent of College B's students are in receipt of Education Maintenance Allowances. Most of

College B's students are on level 3 courses. In 2003/04, around 79 per cent of full-time equivalent learners were studying at level 3, 17 per cent at level 2 and just 4 per cent at level 1.

College B's most recent inspection report, from 2006, identified the key strengths of the college as being: high success rates for many GCE A level subjects; good subject teaching; very good behaviour and positive work ethic of learners; broad range of courses with suitable progression pathways; effective financial and capital project management; innovative projects that widen opportunities for learners and encourage high progression rates to HE. The main areas for improvement identified within the inspection report were: the consistently low success rates of some courses; teaching that fails to meet the individual needs of learners; quality assurance procedures lacking rigour and not incorporating the views of learners; the poor quality and management of tutorials; insufficient monitoring and evaluation by managers.

Retention on Business courses in College B

Data provided by College B show that retention on Level 2 Business courses averaged 89 percent over the last three years (2003-4 to 2005-6), while the average retention rate on Level 3 Business courses during the same period was 91 percent. The retention rates at both of these levels have declined during the last three years: by five percentage points at Level 2 (with rates of 92%, 89% and 87% from 2003-4 to 2005-6); and by two percentage points at Level 3 (with rates of 92%, 92% and 90%). As in College A, this decline may be a reflection of disruption caused to students as a result of a restructuring exercise (in this case as a result of recommendations made following the college's last Ofsted inspection). Another factor which may be relevant is that the level 3 IT programme, which had a poor record of performance, was merged with the Business programme during this period. It seems likely that having to absorb this poorly performing course had a knock-on effect on the retention rate for Business.

Retention strategies in Colleges A and B

The main strategies being used to address student retention in Colleges A and B were identified through my own knowledge as an insider in College A, from reading the colleges' handbooks and by talking to staff and students in the two colleges. Both colleges were found to be implementing a similar range of strategies to improve student retention. Using the work of Beatty-Guenter (1994) and Johnston (2002), these retention strategies can be categorized as sorting, supporting, connecting and transforming.

In terms of 'sorting', Colleges A and B both had an admissions process which seeks to place students on the most appropriate course and selection takes place on the basis of entry criteria. The colleges also had in place induction systems which aim to provide students with the right information to ensure that they are on the right course. The amount of work expected and type of assessment are explained to the students. During induction students are also assessed and given tests in English and Maths to ascertain any support needs, for example the College B prospectus indicates that 'All new students are screened on entry to the College to assess their numeracy and literacy needs' (p.4). The Student Handbook for College A, meanwhile, promises students 'a comprehensive induction programme' (p.11). Figure 1.2 outlines the elements included as part of the induction programme in this college.

Figure 1.2 Elements of induction in College A (source: Student Handbook, p.11)

- An induction to the College and its facilities
- Meeting the course team, and Student Learning Advisor
- Getting all of the information you need about the course and its demands
- Getting an assessment calendar that tells you how and when your progress will be assessed
- Completing sample work, including a sample assignment
- Completing an Induction Assignment to make sure you are on the right course and that you have a realistic chance of passing it
- Arranging any additional help, e.g. with English, Maths or a disability, to make sure you succeed
- Set targets for learning which are individual to you and are monitored regularly

The main strategies with a focus on 'supporting' the students revolve around tutorial support. College A assigns to students a dedicated 'learning advisor' in addition to tutorial support from a course lecturer, whereas in College B students receive tutorials from their course tutor. In both colleges tutorial support involved progress reviews of students' work, drawing up action plans (including Individual Learning Plans) and careers education programmes to support learning. Tutorials also offer students the opportunity to discuss with their tutor or learning advisor any personal issues which may be affecting their studies. Figure 1.3 shows what students in College B are told they can expect from their tutorials.

Other forms of support offered to students in the colleges are childcare support (e.g. College A has five 'modern, well equipped' nurseries across its different sites), information given through induction, careers education and guidance services (including practical help to find work), counselling services, study support and resources through the college libraries, additional learning support for people with language difficulties, support for disabled students and financial support (e.g. Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and various other support funds for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities). In relation to the childcare facilities in College A, prospective students are told in the Student Handbook that 'it is important that you and your child have excellent attendance, as these places are much sought after, and places will not be held open if you do not attend'; similarly, students are informed that they may be eligible for an EMA 'payment of up to £30 a week, depending on attendance at College'. Thus, from the outset, certain forms of support are made conditional on students' attendance.

Figure 1.3 Tutorials in College B (source: College Prospectus, p.6)

Your tutor will:

- help you settle into College life and deal with any problems you may have
- help you organise yourself and complete classwork and homework to deadlines
- deliver a group tutorial every week that will help you develop your study, interpersonal and information skills
- support your development through the use of a Progress File
- give you access to counselling, health and financial advice
- monitor your attendance, punctuality and progress
- keep you informed of College events and enrichment activities
- help you take "the next step" to University, another college or to employment.

Activities to 'connect' the student with the colleges included having Student Representatives who represent the views of the students to the course management, peer support networks for students, structured recreational activities (particularly strongly emphasised in College A), student union facilities and a student council. Course Representatives in College A 'are elected to represent the views of their classmates to the Student Union and College Managers' and 'are given the opportunity to make recommendations for change and to get your voice heard at the highest level'. Students are also represented on the governing bodies of the two colleges. Attendance and punctuality policies and codes of conduct for students in the colleges can also be seen as having a connecting function, as they set out a learning agreement contract between the students and the colleges. These include specifying the rights of students (e.g. a students' charter).. Learning agreements also reinforced the notion of reciprocal rights and responsibilities between the students and the college.

Social facilities and enrichment activities also serve an important connecting function. For example, College B provides a Student Centre where 'students meet to chat and get to know each other. Food, drink and snacks are on sale throughout the day. The Centre is also used for College parties, concerts, meetings and other student activities. The new conservatory offers a bright and airy extension to the Centre where students can relax. In terms of structured enrichment activities, College B has a 'Student Enrichment Officer who organizes clubs, groups, societies, projects, charities, cultural celebrations, theme days, voluntary work and other activities', which provides students with opportunities 'to meet like-minded people and will help you develop a wide range of skills and interests'. Similar facilities and activities are also offered by College A.

Beatty-Guenter defines 'transforming' strategies as those which 'attempt to *transform* students from uncommitted to committed, from uninvolved to involved, from passive to active, or from failure threatened to achievement motivated' (1994:121). Effective teaching and learning is a central component of transforming strategies. Both of the colleges had sound staff recruitment policies in place to recruit qualified and specialised staff to teach. Continuous inspection of teaching and learning was also a feature of both colleges as part of their quality assurance processes. In both colleges students were given 'open access' to their course lecturers, encouraging and motivating them to approach lecturers about their work and any other issues that may affect their learning. In Colleges A and B the Business courses were continually reviewed, developed and updated to meet awarding bodies' requirements and to fulfil students' needs. Support services, including tutorials, also have a role in transforming students into more effective and successful learners.

This chapter has outlined the importance of the issue of student retention in FE and briefly described the two colleges in which my research was conducted. College A is a large, multi-site General FE College, and College B is a much smaller Sixth Form College. The former offers a wide range of provision to a mix of young people and adults, whereas the latter caters mainly for 16-18 year olds on level 3 courses (although it has some level 2 provision, which is included in this study). In both colleges over 60 percent of the students are from ethnic minority communities. The Business departments within each college each have achieved similar retention rates during the last 3 years, around the 90 percent mark – thus, approximately one in ten students who enrolled on Business courses in these colleges failed to complete their course. The two colleges were found to be implementing a similar range of sorting, supporting, connecting and transforming strategies to improve retention. In the next chapter I will explore what research has found about the causes of student withdrawal and the main strategies that have been proposed for improving student retention.

Chapter 2

Retention in Further Education

This chapter reviews the literature on student retention, focussing on what research has found about the reasons for poor student retention, on the strategies that have been recommended for improving retention and on some of the gaps in the research literature.

There is a considerable body of literature on factors affecting student attrition and strategies for improvement. While more research into student retention has been carried out in higher education institutions than in further education, this review considers both HE and FE research as the findings from the former are relevant to this thesis. Although the main focus of this literature review is on research conducted in the UK, reference is also made to relevant literature from studies undertaken in other countries.

Explaining Poor Student Retention

Tinto's model of student drop-out

The work of Tinto (1975) has been very influential within the literature on student retention, as his contribution sought to synthesise previous studies into student drop-out and to develop a theoretical model of student attrition (in the context of the Higher Education system in the United States). Tinto was critical of earlier work on retention which had failed to distinguish between different causes of student drop-out (e.g. resulting from voluntary withdrawal or academic failure) and which had not adequately conceptualised the problem. Drawing on Durkheim's theory of suicide, Tinto argued analogously that if the institution is viewed as a social system then 'lack of integration into the social system of the college will lead to low commitment and increase the probability that individuals will decide to leave the college and pursue alternative activities' (1975:92). Student integration was conceived as applying to two domains, the academic and the social – thus, student drop-out was seen as something that could be caused by insufficient integration academically (that is, poor academic achievement) or lack of integration into the social activities of the college.

Tinto supplemented this conceptual approach to student drop-out with two further elements that could contribute to a 'predictive theory of drop-out': details about individuals' characteristics (e.g. gender, ability, ethnicity, social status, expectations); and an analysis of drop-out as 'a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college' (*ibid*: 94). Taking all of these elements into consideration, Tinto argued that individuals' commitment to completing their course and their commitment to the institution interact with the academic system and with the college social system (through attainment, intellectual development, peer-group and faculty interactions) in ways that would either strengthen or weaken their integration. Individuals' goal commitments and institutional commitment would correspondingly be affected by the degree of integration the student had achieved, academically and socially.

This focus on integration and students' commitments did not mean that Tinto ignored external pressures that might lead students to drop-out – but these concepts provided the frame through which such pressures were understood. Thus, Tinto stressed that students' decisions about whether or not to continue with a course involve a cost-benefit calculation:

> *With regard to staying in college, this perspective argues that a person will tend to withdraw from college when he perceives that an alternative form of investment of time, energies, and resources will yield greater benefits, relative to costs, over time than will staying in college.*
>
> Tinto (1975:97-98)

In this way Tinto's theory also took account of financial pressures and/or labour market opportunities as important external factors which inform individual decisions about whether to continue with a course or to drop-out. However, Tinto (1982) subsequently acknowledged that there were limits to this model, in that it did not give sufficient emphasis to the role of student finances, did not adequately distinguish between behaviours leading to institutional transfer and those leading to permanent withdrawal, and did not highlight important differences in educational careers that are associated with gender, ethnicity and social class. Swail, Redd and Perna (2004) later criticised Tinto's model for failing to take account of the impacts of external factors such as finance, familial obligations and external peer groups in sufficient depth.

In 1988 Tinto expanded his model, making reference to a three stage process of separation, transition and incorporation. Tinto argued that for a student to consider themselves part of the college community, they must progress through *stages* of leaving behind their former communities: after the *initial separation*, there is a *transition stage* during which students struggle to cope with the stresses of departing from their familiar environment, and so do not completely understand or integrate into the new college environment; the *incorporation stage* marks the student's eventual competency as an institutional member. Once they have reached the incorporation stage the student is no longer the person he or she once was, and in effect becomes a new individual. Tinto therefore concluded that lack of integration into college life may result from students' inability to separate themselves from past associations and to make the transition into the new community.

Tinto's social-psychological approach directs attention to the aims and aspirations of students. According to this theory, retention 'is a matter of fulfilling students' educational aims that reflect their educational aspirations' which ultimately 'relate to students' lives and lifestyle, and how education fits into their life aspirations' (Moxley *et al*, 2001:39). This approach was further developed by Bean and Eaton (2001) who looked at interactions between students' background, their attitudes and their experiences within institutions. Although Tinto's work has had a major influence on the literature on student retention, particularly in the United States, the danger of such a strong focus on the social psychological dimension is that the role of wider structural factors in student retention may be underplayed. It is to these wider structural factors – linked to demography, institutions and the nature of the education system itself – that I will now turn.

Factors associated with student withdrawal from Further Education

The most influential and widely known body of work on student retention in FE in England is that carried out by Martinez, which has focused both on the factors affecting student retention and on strategies for improving retention. Martinez and Munday's (1998) study *9,000 Voices: student persistence and drop-out in further education* was one of the largest studies of student retention ever undertaken in the UK. This research involved a questionnaire survey of 8,500 students in 31 colleges, with a further 500 students, teachers, managers and other college staff involved in meetings and discussions. This important study concluded that students 'are more likely to drop out if they:

- do not feel that they have been placed on the most appropriate course;
- applied to college late;
- find it difficult to make friends;
- find it difficult to settle in at the beginning of their course;
- are less satisfied (than current students) that their course is interesting;
- are less satisfied with the quality of teaching;
- are less satisfied with their course timetable;
- are male;
- have difficult financial circumstances (older students) or family circumstances (younger students)' (Martinez & Munday, 1998:7).

These findings support an earlier review of the research evidence undertaken by Martinez (1995), which concluded that 'withdrawn and current students can be quite firmly distinguished by reference to their experience both before and during their participation in college life; and that early leavers tended to show less commitment to their programme of study and had sometimes chosen college for negative reasons, such as having a poor experience of school' (1995:17). The research showed that 'respondents who had withdrawn had a significantly lower opinion of the college than current students' (*ibid*). In particular this showed up in lower ratings given by withdrawn students to the quality of teaching and academic support. Interestingly the views of staff contrasted sharply with those of students. College staff tended to identify financial, domestic and personal difficulties of students as the most likely causes of withdrawal, while students tended to rate these as relatively unimportant and placed more importance on factors relating to the course or college.

Research by Spours (1997) also approached the issue through an investigation into the views of FE staff, in order to balance what he perceived as FEDA's concentration on the views of students. The staff he interviewed in five London colleges felt that retention problems were closely linked to the marketing success of their colleges in bringing in a wider range of students and the pressure that colleges were under to recruit students. The staff felt (but could not prove) that different courses had different retention rates and that those with the better rates tended to be at higher levels and have a clearer vocational focus, while those with lower retention rates were at lower levels and were more 'generic'. Spours identified this as an issue which deserved further research, but argued that most of the impetus for colleges to focus on retention issues was derived from bureaucratic accountability and financial pressures rather than educationally-focussed questions about student achievement and progression.

In the thirty two years since Tinto's theory of student retention was first published, researchers and those working within further and higher education institutions have grappled with the complexity of the problem of student drop-out. A wide range of causal factors have been put forward to help explain why students do not always complete their courses, and I will now outline in more detail the major factors that have been associated with poor student retention.

Age, Gender and Ethnicity

National level data derived from Individual Student Records by the FEFC for 1994-5 indicated that: students aged 25 and over were less likely than younger students to withdraw from courses; males (with a non-completion rate of 12 per cent) were slightly more likely to drop out than females (with a drop-out rate of 10 per cent); Black Caribbean and other Black students had relatively higher withdrawal rates than those from other ethnic backgrounds; and full-time students from Pakistani backgrounds who were aged 19 and over also had relatively higher withdrawal rates (Martinez, 1997a:44-45). These figures should be treated with caution, however, both because of their age and also because other studies present a more complex picture of the interactions between age, gender, ethnicity and student retention.

Nonetheless, the FEFC data provide some indication of the national picture of student retention, which has not been reproduced in this level of detail in more recent years.

A study of 500 non-completers of Modern Apprenticeships in five sectors (Care, Hospitality, Retail, Motor and Electro-technical) by IFF Research Ltd (2000) found that 'reasons [for leaving] vary widely by age, gender and sector', and that most of the reasons for leaving did not relate directly to the training component of the Apprenticeships. Rather, for these apprentices, the most common reasons for non-completion were getting a new job, the difficulty of combining training with the workload of the job, problems at work and personal issues.

Students' age has also been found to be linked to different reasons for non-completion. McGivney's (1996a) research into drop-out among mature students distinguished different categories of non-completion, including 'non-starting', 'transfer', 'academic failure' and 'interrupted learning' and noted that the reasons for withdrawal vary according to student group, the nature of the institution and the subject studied. Mature students were found to be more likely than those of standard age to give non-academic reasons for leaving a course of study. However, McGivney's review of studies on the impact of age on retention in further, higher and adult education found the evidence was complex and 'generally inconclusive' (*ibid*:67).

Longitudinal research in Scotland by McDougall (2001) used a statistical analysis of the management information system at Cardonald College in Glasgow over a 9-year period (from 1991 to 1999) to explore the reasons for non-completion. This data was supplemented by student interviews during 1999/2000. McDougall found that social background, the age of students and the level of course they were on all had an impact on retention rates. The greatest attrition was found to be amongst younger students on full-time non-advanced courses: the age groups under 18, 18-21 and 22-24 on non-advanced full-time courses recorded very high rates of loss, at 30.5 per cent, 30.5per cent and 38.2 per cent respectively. Social class was also highlighted as an important factor affecting retention, but this study found no statistically significant differences between male and female students.

While McDougall did not identify gender as a significant factor affecting student retention in this particular college, other research suggests that gender can have a bearing on student drop-out. However, there is no consensus on whether it is male or female students who are at greatest risk of non-completion. Martinez and Munday (1998) concluded that male students were more likely to drop out than female students: 'In most of the colleges, men were over-represented and women were under represented among the groups of withdrawn students. The research findings indicate that male students are slightly more likely to drop out than female students' (Martinez & Munday 1998:19). However others have highlighted factors making female students more at risk of dropping out. Research conducted in 24 colleges by the Responsive College Unit in 1998 found significant variations in retention rates among female students. For full-time female students these varied from a minimum of 33 per cent to a maximum of 68 per cent (RCU 1998:3). The work of McGivney (1992, 1993) identified reasons such as personal and domestic factors as hindering women's access to participation and progression in education.

National level research from the English ISR (FEFC, 1996) found that Black Caribbean and Black 'Other' students tended to have higher withdrawal rates, particularly among 16-18 year old male students. In contrast white part-time adult students had relatively low withdrawal rates. Martinez and Munday's (1998) study also found that in some colleges students from minority ethnic groups were more likely to leave early, in many cases because of cultural and language barriers. However, they qualified this by saying that, in their study, 'ethnicity did not appear to influence drop-out in a very significant way, and where it did, it operated somewhat differently across the four colleges involved' (1998:21-2). They concluded from this that national trends did not operate uniformly across colleges and that 'variations in drop-out between different ethnic groups at the institutional level will be greater than at the national level' (*ibid*:22). This view is supported by Barwuah *et al* (1997), who found a reversal of the national picture in a selection of *urban* colleges, in that it was white students and older students who had the highest drop-out rates in these institutions. Meanwhile, research conducted in Tower Hamlets College by Hooper (2000) found that Bangladeshi and Afro-Caribbean students had higher withdrawal rates than those from other backgrounds; and an earlier study of retention in HE also found higher withdrawal rates among Afro-Caribbean students (Singh, 1990).

The tentative conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that, nationally, younger students are generally at greater at risk of non-completion than older students (although as students become older the reasons why they withdraw change). Males tend to have an increased likelihood of drop-out than females, although for some courses the opposite may be the case. The available data also suggest that students from certain ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to drop-out, with Black Caribbean and other Black students particularly at risk. However, it is important to be aware that these associations can vary according to the type of college and course.

School to College Transition

The failure to make a successful transition from school to college has been frequently cited as one of the causes of non-completion in FE (e.g. Davies, 1999; HUCS, 2002; Henderson & Nelson, 2003; Mackie, 1998; Thomas, 2000; Tinto, 1975). Issues of transition are interesting because they do not neatly fit into either category of 'institutional' or 'external' causes of student drop-out. By definition, transition problems are about *both* the individual student's prior educational experiences at school (including motivational, attitudinal and behavioural factors arising from the school experience) and the steps that colleges can take to help the student to adapt to the new environment. Thomas (2000), Mackie (1998) and Tinto (1975) have all highlighted the importance of students finding and developing friendship and support networks in order to be able to integrate successfully into the FE environment.

Studies by Martinez (1995) and Weiss (1990) indicate that students' experience of starting college after GCSE is a personal challenge and a period of upheaval and transition which they can find very stressful (see also Szulecka *et al*, 1987; Earwalker, 1992; Vernberg & Field, 1992). This is especially the case for students who may have performed poorly at GCSE and whose self-confidence and learning identity may be fragile. A report by the Audit Commission and Ofsted (1993) found a relationship between poor retention and students' previous GCSE results, in particular for those on A level programmes. Difficulties in adjusting to advanced level courses and/or problems in integrating into the college environment can result in poor attendance and behavioural problems, both of which have been found to put students at greater risk of dropping out (Coard *et al*, 1997).

Difficulties in adapting to college courses are not unique to younger learners entering college directly from school, but have also been found to lead to early withdrawal among adult learners. McGivney (1996a) distinguished reasons for early withdrawal from courses by adult learners from those which lead to later withdrawal. Reasons for early withdrawal include:

- frustrated expectation (of course/institution);
- inappropriate or rushed course choice;
- lack of preparedness for level of work;

- insufficient background knowledge/grounding in a subject;
- workload and time commitment greater than anticipated;
- lack of academic skills such as essay writing, note taking;
- difficulties in settling in and integrating into the social and academic life of an institution;
- lack of support from 'significant others'.

Factors associated with later withdrawal include:

- changes in personal circumstances;
- work-related factors;
- achievement of desired goals;
- long duration of programme of study (leading to demotivation);
- fear of or unpreparedness for examinations (*ibid*:86).

Problems of student transition and adjustment to FE college courses are bound up with questions about the adequacy of the information, advice and guidance which direct students on to courses in the first place. Not surprisingly, student drop-out has frequently been linked with a failure of guidance – a major conclusion of FEDA's (1999) study. Foreman-Peck and Thompson's (1998) small-scale study followed a group of 19 students on a GNVQ Advanced Business course, almost all of whom failed to complete successfully. They found that these students did not appear to have had access to sufficient independent advice, guidance and information and that a variety of other factors – such as teachers' assumptions about their ability, and the college's desire to fill places in the course – had led to them joining the course.

In short, it appears that there can often be difficulties of transition for both younger and older learners, making it difficult for some students to successfully integrate into college academic and social life, increasing the likelihood that they may withdraw.

Type and Level of Course

The course and qualification for which students enrol has also been found to be linked to the likelihood of withdrawal – in terms both of the *level* of course studied and the actual *subject area.* Martinez's analysis of national level data concluded that 'There is a strong suggestion.... that retention rates vary inversely with the level of programme studied... withdrawal rates for programmes at entry, level 1 and level 2 are higher than programmes at level 3' (1997a:47). In relation to 'substantial qualitative and quantitative' FEDA research on GNVQs, Martinez and Munday reached an even firmer conclusion, arguing that this research had demonstrated 'quite unequivocally that factors affecting persistence and drop-out may vary in different types of qualification, programme area, mode of attendance, etc.' (1998:58). There is also evidence that different types of course have different outcomes in terms of student retention. For example, McGivney (1996a) found that students studying science or technology subjects were more likely to give academic or course-related reasons for withdrawing than those studying arts or humanities subjects.

Payne's (2000) analysis of data from the England and Wales Youth Cohort study looked at the success rates of young people who reached school leaving age in the summer of 1995. This study uncovered wide variations in the success rates of students taking different post-16 qualifications, with City and Guilds courses, NVQs (at levels 3 and 4) and GNVQ level 1 courses all carrying a higher risk of being unsuccessful. Meanwhile A levels, BTEC courses and higher level GNVQ courses carried a lower risk of the students being unsuccessful. While Payne's data does not strictly relate to retention, it is suggestive of differences associated with different types of course or qualification.

It is also constructive to contrast the drop-out rate of 78 per cent from work-related training courses found by Wilkinson (1995) with the rate of just under 20 per cent amongst A level FE students that was found by Fielding, Belfield and Thomas (1998). However, the work of Fielding, Belfield and Thomas also cast some doubt on the importance of the type of course in student retention. They conducted an analysis of 2,648 A level students in nine English further education, sixth form and tertiary education colleges, finding an overall attrition rate (based on the number of enrolments) of 19.6 per cent. While some students dropped one or more of a number of A levels for which they were enrolled, the researchers concluded that most of the drop-outs were full drop-outs rather than partial and that the propensity to drop-out pertained more to the individual's decision about education than to particular courses. They also found that students' prior attainment at GCSE is a major explanation of the rate of drop-out and more important than the effects which may be attributable to the individual colleges, a finding which challenged FEDA's emphasis on the ability of colleges to make a difference.

Most of the evidence on student retention and the type and level of course for which students are enrolled points to the existence of variations according to these two factors. While it appears that drop-out rates tend to be higher for lower level courses, it is very difficult to discern clear patterns according to the type of course students are on (because the relationship between retention and type of course is highly variable and is further complicated by the fact that different qualifications are also part of this equation).

Quality of Teaching and Learning

The National Audit Office (2002), Martinez (2001), Morgan (2001), NATFHE (2000), Ogunleye (2000), Davies (1999) and McGivney (1994) have all contributed to the debate about the impact that the quality of teaching and learning has on student retention. This research provides a good deal of evidence indicating that good quality teaching is important for promoting student retention. As suggested by Martinez, 'withdrawal rates may be higher where there is: uninspiring, boring and unstructured teaching; poor group ethos; poor course organisation and staff-student communication; and a mismatch between the largely 'activist' and 'hands-on' learning preferences of students and the more theoretical preferences of the teachers' (Martinez 2001:4). Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) found that many students considered the way they were taught lacked imagination, particularly in subjects such as Science and Engineering on which teaching was found to be less interactive and too didactic.

Braxton *et al* (2000), building on Tinto's earlier theoretical work, undertook a longitudinal study of 718 American university students which found that techniques of *active learning* could enhance student integration, thereby reducing the likelihood of drop-out. Drawing on Bonwell and Eison's definition, they define active learning as 'any class activity that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing'. The types of active learning activities that were identified included 'discussion, questions faculty ask students in class, co-operative learning, debates, role playing, and the questions that faculty ask on course examinations' (Braxton *et al*, 2000:571). Thus, while active learning applies mainly to teaching and learning, it can also be incorporated to enhance course assessment.

Davies (1999), like Martinez (2001), emphasised the factors that lie within the control of colleges. Drawing on findings from research by FEDA on non-completion of GNVQ courses (based on a survey of over 3,000 current and withdrawn students), Davies concluded that levels of student satisfaction in a number of course-related areas was linked most strongly with rates of non- and unsuccessful completion. These were: 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 (Davies, 1999).

The available evidence points strongly to quality of teaching and learning as a key factor in student retention, with more active forms of learning seen as being important. However, we cannot know precisely what the effects of quality of teaching and learning are on student withdrawal because of the difficulty of defining and measuring 'good quality teaching and learning'. Nonetheless these studies, based heavily upon students' reported satisfaction, lend strong support to the common-sense supposition that the quality of teaching and learning plays an important role in supporting student retention.

Students' Commitment and Motivation

The importance of student motivation in their retention can be seen from the fact that, in the LSC's National Learner Satisfaction Survey, maintaining personal motivation was identified as the second most commonly occurring 'difficulty' that FE students experience. Twenty per cent of students surveyed highlighted this as a problem, which was second only to the difficulty of 'managing to fit course commitments in with other commitments at home' (LSC, 2005b:29). Earlier surveys have also stressed the importance of students' motivation. Barwuah *et al* (1997), in a survey of 835 students in 8 urban FE colleges, found that the most significant factor affecting retention was student commitment and motivation. Inability to cope with course demands, low levels of ability and poor language and key skills were also contributory factors. Those who had poor records of attendance or behavioural problems at school were also more likely to drop-out. Thorpe (1991:73) notes that successful study is often related to the strength of motivation of the individual student; and research by Miller (1990) reported that lack of motivation and interest accounted for 48 per cent of the reasons given for early withdrawal among US students.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) offer an alternative view of student commitment and motivation, seeing it not as a 'problem' to be addressed but as something that inevitably changes as students' lives outside college change. They argue that much research on retention has been based on a series of false assumptions. These are: students' wants, needs and interests remain constant throughout the course; that the prime causes of drop out lie within the influence, if not the control, of teachers and college procedures; that learning on the course must have been unsatisfactory; that the only appropriate time to change educational or career direction is after a course has been completed; that dropping out from a course is different from and more serious than other deviations from an intended career pathway. These assumptions are challenged by Bloomer and Hodkinson who reject the emphasis of Martinez and others on those factors which are potentially within the control of colleges.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) followed 79 Year 11 pupils from school into college over a two-year period, and found that many of these students significantly changed their intentions. Thus, 'As learning careers change it is not always appropriate to finish something which was started at a time when interests and aspirations were quite different' (*ibid*:114). Many students changed their career intentions and objectives during the course of the study, and they did so for a wide variety of reasons, including changing interests, their experience at college, and outside influences. The students had complex and varying sets of 'needs' which were not amenable to any simple formulation. Bloomer and Hodkinson concluded that all colleges can do is to try to develop an 'accepting' culture, strengthen student-tutor relationships and accept that student and college desires do not always coincide. They argued that management approaches in FE 'are likely to flounder because so many of the factors which influence student learning lie beyond their control and even their influence' (*ibid*:111).

The role of student commitment and motivation brings us back to the work of Tinto and the importance which his theoretical model attached to students' goal commitments and commitment to the institution. In the absence of the motivation to do well in their courses, students are unlikely to achieve and to feel well integrated, and so are more likely to drop out. Like the quality of teaching and learning, motivation may therefore be seen as a 'common sense' explanation for student drop-out. However, Bloomer and Hodkinson remind us of the complexity of students' 'needs', suggesting that motivation is shaped by interactions taking place within the college and also in the student's life outside college. It therefore seems necessary to adopt a dynamic view of student commitment and motivation as a factor which is vitally important in student retention, but which is also subject to fluctuation at the level of the individual, and which interacts with other factors in the student's life.

Financial Constraints and Employment

There have been different views about the links between financial pressures and student retention. Some have argued that financial constraint is a key reason why potential learners may not enter further education in the first place and that it leads to drop-out among those who do become students (see for example HUCS, 2002; Henderson & Nelson, 2003; HEFCE, 1997; Mackie, 1998; NATFHE, 2000; Thomas, 2002). Others have argued that there are no differences in the financial situations of students who do and who do not withdraw from their courses (e.g. Davies, 1999; Gordon *et al*, 2002; Martinez, 2001). Kerkvliet and Nowell (2004) suggest that the background of students (e.g. whether there was a need to work to support studies) has an impact on whether financial considerations influence students' withdrawal behaviour.

Martinez and Munday (1998) note in their research that early withdrawal is linked to financial constraints and the desire to take up employment, particularly amongst women and older students. Studies carried out by FEU (1994), BTEC (1993) and the Audit Commission and Ofsted (1993) also concluded that financial and employment factors are linked to poor retention. As Tinto had argued in the 1970s, it appears from these studies that students may indeed weigh the cost of continuing with their course against the benefits and that they withdraw when the costs of continuing with their course outweigh the benefits.

A study of early leavers from youth training schemes found that the most common reasons for leaving early reported by trainees were that they 'obtained a job, they were not earning enough money, and they were not happy with the way the programme was run or they were not getting the training they wanted' (ORC International, 1999:1). Also, 'a good experience while on employer placements was critical to the perceived success of the programme and a key determinant of completion' (*ibid*). Wilkinson (1995) reported a study of 250 young people aged 16-24 living in peripheral housing estates in Sunderland in the North East of England. He charted the connections between economic disadvantage, histories of family unemployment, residential insecurity and rejection of schooling on the one hand and continuing non-participation in education and training on the part of the young people studied. Thirty-six per cent of those studied had been on some form of training programme, but 78 per cent of these had failed to complete them. He concluded that non-participation by these young people was a manifestation of 'a much wider social malaise', a major component of which was the lack of employment opportunities in their area. Similarly, Frank and Houghton (1997), in a study of 400 adult drop-outs from FE, found that students often left courses for a combination of reasons, and that 60 per cent of these reasons were unrelated to the course or college. The most common were job changes and illness. Research with GNVQ students by Davies (1999) found that 25 per cent of non-completers had left because they had found employment.

On balance it does appear, for certain groups of students at least, that financial constraints and local labour market opportunities (either because these are scarce or readily available) can have a bearing on whether or not students complete courses.

Summary

This review of the literature has shown that an extensive list of factors may affect student drop-out, although the research evidence is not entirely clear or consistent about the exact role and relative importance of each of the identified factors. McGivney concluded her review of the evidence in relation to the retention of adults in further and higher education by saying, 'The diversity of research findings on the possible links between student characteristics and drop-out suggests that it would be very unsafe to use the former as predictors of non-completion' (1996a:81). Little seems to have emerged from research over the last eleven years to suggest a different conclusion. As far as student retention is concerned, it appears that 'demography is not destiny!' – a conclusion that is reinforced by the existence of variations in retention rates between colleges with similar student populations (Martinez, 1997a:55).

It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers have looked at the interactions between factors in student withdrawal. Martinez concluded that 'Two or more factors usually affect a student's decision to withdraw' and furthermore that 'Different factors will affect different groups of students in different ways' (1995:23). Later work by Martinez (1996, 1997b) found indications that previous educational attainment, social class, course choice and gender and ethnicity may predispose some groups of students to leave early, although it was possible that any such effects depended on mutual reinforcement between two or more demographic factors. Davies (1999) also pointed to the importance of the interaction between factors, arguing that financial problems can often act as a 'trigger' to withdrawal when encountered alongside other difficulties. Thus, while financial difficulties are a common trigger of student drop-out, Davies' research suggested that in general, withdrawal appears to result only in cases where students already have doubts about whether 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.

In conclusion, it appears that it may often be *combinations* of factors that lead to non-completion, and that different factors may be more important for different groups of students and in different contexts. Nonetheless it has been possible to identify from the literature the main factors that contribute to poor student retention. These varied factors range across the demographic characteristics of the students (age, gender and ethnicity), their experiences in making the transition from school to college, the type of course and qualification which they are doing, the quality of teaching and learning, students' levels of commitment and motivation, and financial pressures and the 'pull' of the local labour market. The breadth of causes of non-completion, allied to the conclusion that these are likely to operate in combination, suggests that strategies for improving retention need to address factors that are both internal and external to colleges. We now turn to consider the main strategies that have been identified for improving student retention.

Strategies for Improving Retention

It is clear from the foregoing review that non-completion is very often the result of a combination of factors. Some of these factors are internal to the institution and therefore directly within the control of college staff; other causes are external, linked to the complex realities of students' lives, including their prior educational experiences at school (often of past failure) and financial pressures and the need to work as well as to study. Clearly colleges are unlikely to ever be able to completely eradicate the problem of non-completion (Tinto, 1982), but as the following quote from McGivney makes clear there is much that they could do to improve student retention:

> *High non-completion rates indicate that some students do not acquire what they want or expect; that some are ill-advised (or not advised) and consequently make the wrong choice of course or institution; that some are intimidated or alienated by the institution or by course content and teaching styles, and that some experience problems that are potentially soluble given the right kind of intervention, guidance and support.*
>
> (McGivney,1996b:133)

As part of this review of the literature on retention the main strategies recommended by researchers to improve retention in FE colleges were examined. These strategies have been divided into nine themes, each of which will be considered in turn:

1. Recruitment and induction
2. Course management
3. Motivation
4. Communication
5. Teaching and learning
6. Course assessment
7. Student support
8. College environment
9. Quality assurance

The above nine strategies are of different types and can be viewed in different ways. Some are very clearly and explicitly identified as formal college strategies (for example, teaching and learning, student support, quality assurance and course management), whereas others – such as student motivation and the college environment – may be seen more as factors that are simply taken as givens. However, it is argued here, based upon the literature review and my preliminary investigation, that all of the above can be seen as areas in which colleges can employ strategies to improve student retention.

Recruitment and induction

The recruitment and induction phase is crucial for guiding students on to the most appropriate course, increasing the likelihood of students being retained if they are appropriately advised, well-informed and develop early bonds with the college staff and fellow students (Martinez & Munday, 1998). In the words of McGivney, 'The magnitude of student loss in the early stages of a course highlights the importance of pre-course contact; information and advice as well as the need for support and to encourage students during the periods of transition' (McGivney 1996a:120). Strategies linked to pre-enrolment and induction have been identified by Yorke and Longden (2004:123), Morgan (2001:13), McGivney (1996a:120), Goodhew (2002), the National Audit Office (2002) and Barwuah *et al* (1997).

Yorke and Longden identify three main purposes of recruitment and induction, as: an opportunity to build an awareness of the requirements of the course; to begin the process of engagement with the institution; and to prepare aspiring entrants for the demands of academic study (Yorke & Longden 2004:123). Giving accurate information to prospective students is seen as a vital part of this process (Goodhew, 2002; National Audit Office, 2002: Martinez, 2002; Tresman, 2002). Some institutions, including colleges A and B in this study, have expanded online admissions processes to allow prospective students and college staff to communicate in order to help students make the right choice of course.

Recommendations have also been made about institutions improving their selection procedures to ensure that they recruit students who have the potential to cope with the demands of their course (Gordon *et al*, 2002; Henderson, 2003; Martinez, 2001). However, as Morgan (2002) points out, institutions and courses vary in the degree to which they have the luxury of being able to select their student intake. This point draws attention to the fact that there are a number of potential tensions and conflicts around student recruitment, which Martinez has summarised (figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 – Potential tensions and conflicts around student recruitment (from Martinez, 1997a:23)

Commitment to open access	v.	Poor student outcomes
Strict entry criteria	v.	Pressure to put 'bums on seats'
Student or parental perceptions of best choice of course	v.	College perceptions of best choice of course
Desire to maintain contact with students following application or initial enquiry or application	v.	Resource constraints
Impartial information and advice	v.	Need to recruit students to a particular course
Teacher management of pre-enrolment processes	v.	Centralised and standardised advice and guidance services
Creation of universal student entitlement	v.	Creation of differential entitlement by mode of attendance or type of student
Specialisation of functions and systems creating a complex student pathway	v.	Creation of a transparent and simple pathway
Monitoring and evaluation of pre-enrolment services	v.	Difficulties around systematic information gathering and monitoring

In spite of these possible tensions and conflicts, which might even be seen as inherent difficulties in all student recruitment, colleges have implemented measures designed to improve their recruitment and induction activities. These include: clarifying entry criteria; improving pre-enrolment systems so that the information gathered can assist in curriculum planning, more effective placement of students on courses; market research for the college;

redesigning programme and course information materials from the point of view of the intended students; developing specialist adult guidance services; tracking student progress from point of contact to course commencement; and evaluating recruitment and induction events (Martinez, 1997a:35).

Martinez and Munday (1998:86) have argued that one way of improving the effectiveness of induction is to treat it as a process and not simply as an event. They suggest that if induction is treated as an event then there is a tension between the demands of providing ever more information, familiarisation and orientation with the need to start the course. However, if induction is approached as a process it offers the opportunity to blend group formation, information giving, hands-on activities, initial assessment and some early work on study skills with coursework over a period of weeks. Martinez's (1997a) report found a consensus that initial assessment has an important role to play in retention strategies, not only for identifying students' learning support needs but also to assist in curriculum planning, in placing students on the most appropriate course and in developing student learning plans. However, the findings of this case study review suggested that 'it is not so much the initial assessment on its own which affects retention *but rather effective teaching interventions and changes to curriculum structures and processes triggered by the outcomes of such assessments*' (Martinez, 1997a:42 – emphasis added).

The period of course recruitment and induction represents the earliest point at which colleges can begin to take steps to help ensure the retention of their students. Colleges undoubtedly have to deal with certain tensions in the recruitment process – such as that between a commitment to open access and the greater likelihood of poor student outcomes that this may bring – and this makes it all the more important that students are successfully placed upon the most appropriate course. However, the literature indicates that there is much that colleges can do during induction, particularly if approached as a process rather than as a single event, to support student retention from day one. Initial assessments to identify learning support needs are a vital part of this.

Course management

Course management strategies refer to measures taken within individual curriculum areas once a student has commenced their programme of study. While course management can be seen as overlapping with some of the other nine strategies (such as teaching and learning, course assessment and student support), it is distinctly concerned with course development, curriculum audit and curriculum structure. Important elements of course management that have a bearing on student retention include: auditing and mapping the curriculum against the needs of intended students; developing new courses or modules to meet identified needs; introducing modularisation and unitisation (a feature of the approach taken in College A); and effective timetable management (Martinez, 1997a). Another aspect of course management is curriculum development, such as the introduction of components of 'enquiry-based learning', which Taylor (2005) found to be a successful innovation within nursing programmes.

Course management strategies focus on what can be achieved within colleges at the departmental and course levels (as distinct from college-wide policies and interventions). Davies (1999) outlined a case study of a course in one college to show how new procedures had increased the retention rate from 75 per cent to 100 per cent and increased levels of student satisfaction with the course. This had been done by introducing a departmental policy, interviewing all candidates for places on the courses, setting out the college's expectations of the students, introducing an enrolment and induction programme, improving staff-staff and staff-student communication, monitoring attendance, and providing tutorial support and guidance. It is findings such as this which led to the promotion of in-college strategies such as that outlined by Rose (1996) who recommended using information about student satisfaction to inform management decisions. McGuire (2000) similarly believed that retention could be improved by seeking early indications of student satisfaction (coupled with clearer course guidance, exchanging best practice in teaching and learning and increasing collaboration with schools).

In short, course management appears to be important in student retention because it is the primary level at which college staff can come together to plan, implement and review changes to improve student experiences on particular courses. As indicated by Davies (1999), effective communication between staff, and between staff and students, appears to be a key aspect of course management. The two colleges in this study have continuous course development, updating and developing courses in response to funding changes and awarding bodies' specifications. For example, in College A there have been annual curriculum changes during each of the last 4 years (e.g. from GNVQ to AVCE, and then from AVCE to BTEC National), which means that the course management has had to be adjusted to the delivery of these new qualifications. These curricular changes have meant that staff and students have constantly had to adjust and adapt, creating an ever-changing context for course management.

Motivation

Sellers and van der Velden define student motivation as 'The intrinsic interest in learning and/or participating in learning' (2003:17). For this thesis a broader definition of motivation has been chosen which, as well as intrinsic interest in learning, includes students' desire to complete their course and achieve a qualification as well as any other factors which may provide individual motivation for them to remain on their course (e.g. encouragement and approval from teaching staff, financial incentives such as EMA, or social reasons such as wanting to remain with friends).

Although working with a narrower definition of student motivation, Sellers and van der Velden (2003) provide useful suggestions for how motivation can be enhanced to support student retention. The three key aspects to this are: returning to the student's original reasons for choosing the course in the first place; creating what they term 'socio-educational networks' (e.g. group-based learning and team building activities) in which learning is supported and created; and giving learners confidence, which comes from understanding the context of teaching and learning activities. While the factors that motivate students can be many and varied, extending beyond their interest in and engagement with the curriculum, it is nonetheless crucial to student motivation that the attempt is made to restore to them a sense of the 'joy of learning':

> *Returning to the joy of learning and a sense of achievement should be supported in interactions with learners. This is not the same as 'making learning fun' which often does not go further than supporting a superficial enjoyment of taking part in an activity.*
>
> (Sellers & van der Velden, 2003:17)

However, Prescott and Simpson (2004), drawing upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs, suggest that before students can become highly motivated learners, certain 'hygiene factors' must first be addressed. These include basic and practical anxieties that all new students may experience, such as concerns about timetabling and room allocations, becoming competent in using library and IT facilities, and completing early coursework assignments on time. It is argued that these 'environmental conditions must be satisfied before progress to other levels will succeed' (Prescott & Simpson, 2004:253).

Student motivation can be seen as being connected with several (if not all) of the other retention strategies being considered here. The experience of induction, communication, course management, teaching and learning, assessment and so on all have the potential to either enhance students' motivation or lead to them becoming de-motivated and put them at risk of not completing their course. The BTEC (1993) research recommended that giving students more individual attention is the key to improving retention rates. This would include providing students with the appropriate learning opportunities, listening to and motivating them. The issue of student motivation and commitment takes us back to Tinto's (1975) theory of student drop-out. It still appears to be widely accepted that effective retention strategies must address the issue of how student's commitment to their learning, and to the wider college community, can be strengthened.

Communication

Improved communication between staff and students is frequently mentioned in discussions of strategies for improving student retention. This is important at all stages of the student's experience, but is perhaps most crucial during the recruitment and induction phase and during the early weeks and months of a student's time on their course. Foreman, Peck and Thompson (1998) and McGivney (1996a) have stressed the importance of information and guidance to ensure that students are directed onto the most appropriate course (see also Goodhew, 2002; National Audit Office, 2002: Martinez, 2002; and Tresman, 2002). However, as shown in figure 2.1, there can be a tension between giving impartial information and advice and the pressure to recruit students to particular courses.

Effective communication is also an important element of student support – both directly, in the form of staff-student communication in tutorials (Moxley *et al*, 2001), and indirectly in terms of ensuring that students are well-informed about the different forms of college support that are available to them (Barwuah *et al*, 1997). Clear communication, in terms of explaining assignments and the quality of feedback that is provided, is also a vital aspect of course assessment. Another important dimension is that college managers regard communication with students as a two-way process and seek to use feedback from students to inform decision-making in the management of courses (Davies, 1999; McGuire, 2000; Rose, 1996). Obtaining student feedback has been identified as an important element of the quality assurance process (Martinez & Munday, 1998). Communication therefore appears to be important in its own right, but it is also integral to the effective implementation of the other eight strategies.

Teaching and learning

The literature on student retention makes repeated reference to students' perceptions of teaching and learning as an important influence on their decision to withdraw or stay to complete a particular course (Morgan:2001:15). Therefore implementing effective strategies to improve the quality of teaching should have an impact on retention rates (Henderson, 2003; National Audit Office, 2002:para 2.21; Martinez, 1997a, 2001; Morgan, 2001:13; Yorke, 2002; Yorke & Longden, 2004:112).

Martinez in his research on improving student retention (1997a:96) recommends that colleges should enrich and vary teaching and learning experiences, empower students, increase student autonomy and improve 'learning to learn' (metacognitive skills). Sorrell (2002) also recommended the use of a variety of teaching techniques and strategies to improve student retention. The Further Education Unit (1994) incorporated the work of Mansell and Parkins' recommendations in its list of strategies to help improve retention rates in FE. This included monitoring students' perception of their classroom experiences and providing ongoing support, checking that the pace of teaching and learning is appropriate for individual learners, providing students with course objectives, activities and schedules in advance, identifying preferred methods where alternatives may be appropriate (e.g. structured lessons or more informal group work) and providing learning enhancement through workshop activities.

Other suggestions for improving teaching and learning include designing learning in such a way as to ensure early success and boost confidence (Pupynin & Crowder, 1995). Munn, MacDonald and Lowden (1992) confirm that learners' confidence can also be raised by pacing course content so that there is a gradual increase in difficulty, and by using feedback from students to inform course design. Smith and Bailey argued that personal attention is key to good retention rates: 'The over-riding objective in encouraging good retention rates is to emphasise the importance of developing systems which give as much individual attention as possible to our students' (1993:149).

We have already seen that a key aspect of student motivation is their intrinsic interest in their course of study and the learning that they are engaged in. This points to teaching and learning as being pivotal in ensuring student retention and achievement, and this view is widely supported in the literature. It should be noted, however, that a wide range of specific suggestions have been advanced for improving teaching and learning and, as argued by Martinez, these may be context-specific rather than universally applicable: 'Innovation at operational level will almost certainly be specific to the programme area, to the course and perhaps even to the individual cohort of students' (Martinez 1997a:111). Therefore teaching and learning strategies cannot be proscribed in detail. The key point is rather that teaching staff are clear that teaching and learning is important in student retention and that there is the opportunity and support for teachers to review their teaching, exchange ideas about good practice and seek to continually improve.

Course assessment

From the point of view of improving student retention, the two major issues associated with course assessment concern how well assessment arrangements support students to succeed and difficulties for some students in coping with the volume of assessment work. As Martinez and Munday note:

> *Workload is one of the most frequently cited reasons why students drop out... Problems in coping with the volume of assignments rather than their level of difficulty are commonplace and students find it hard to cope with heavy workloads when too many assignments are required at once or personal circumstances make it difficult to fulfil requirements at particular times.*
>
> (Martinez & Munday, 1998:91)

York and Longden (2004:143) have also highlighted the potentially de-motivating effects on students of poorly planned course work and assessment. They therefore suggest that teachers should help students plan their work by getting them to map out at an early opportunity the course work requirements. Doing this may give students a better chance of scheduling their workload in order to prevent peak periods which may put them off the course. However, while workload (and a feeling of not being able to cope with the demands of a course) may often be a factor in student withdrawal, Martinez and Munday's survey data found that current and withdrawn students expressed similar views about being able to find time to study and having the right amount of course work.

Recommendations for improving course assessment have centred upon careful planning and implementation of assessment schedules, greater consistency in providing students with assessment plans and schemes of work, equitable enforcement of assignment deadlines, rationalising assessments to reduce the assessment burden, support with portfolio building, and ensuring that completion deadlines are evenly spread.

Teachers have also stressed that 'positive feedback is vital in sustaining student motivation' because 'students need encouragement and support to persist' (Martinez & Munday, 1998:92). It is also important that student receive good quality feedback on their work and that, if they do fall behind with assignments, that appropriate arrangements are made to help them to catch up (Barwuah *et al*, 1997; Martinez & Munday, 1998). McGivney identified how the following points of good assessment practice have been found to be valued by students: 'specific instructions on what is needed in an essay; clear explanations of grading schemes; rapid turnaround in grading and returning assessments; practice in examination techniques and providing examples of model answers; and frequent and regular feedback on performance' (McGivney, 1996a:153).

Course assessment is closely linked to teaching and learning, although the main issues (how well assessment supports student success and planning assessment so that students' workloads are manageable) are perhaps more generally applicable and not as context specific as teaching and learning strategies. Another important practical aspect of course assessment is clear communication with students, both in setting out the assessment criteria and in giving timely and clear feedback on students' work.

Student support

Strategies to improve student support represent 'probably the single most widely adopted retention strategy within colleges' (Martinez, 1997a:116).

These strategies have focussed on tutoring, financial support (to provide help with the direct costs of studying, with travel costs and with child care), additional learning support, financial advice, liaison with job centres and other agencies, health care support and counselling services. In contrast to the other types of support in this list, tutoring is something from which can be applied universally to all students (that is, student need and eligibility for this type of support is not dependent on their circumstances in the way that it would be for access to hardship funds, child care or counselling services). It is perhaps for this reason that tutoring has been described as 'a cornerstone of college retention strategies' (Martinez, 1997a:63) and as 'crucial in motivating, supporting and retaining students' (Bawuah *et al*, 1997:14).

Within FE colleges during the mid-1990s there were moves to standardise tutoring practices within colleges. The main developments in tutoring identified by Martinez (1997a) at this time were: developing the role of the tutor towards acting as a 'manager' and co-ordinator of student learning (combining learning and personal support functions); tutors playing a greater role in monitoring and supporting student progress; tutors providing more support to students with basic and key skills; greater specification of the requirements and objectives of tutorial support; the clarification of student entitlement in respect of the nature of the tutoring support they can expect to receive; and tutor development programmes to improve the quality of tutorial support (also identified by Barwuah *et al*, 1997).

Given the emphasis that some have placed upon financial constraints as a factor contributing to student drop-out (e.g. HUCS, 2002; Henderson & Nelson, 2003; HEFCE, 1997; Mackie, 1998; NATFHE, 2000; Thomas, 2002), it is not surprising that some colleges have offered financial support to assist some of their students with the costs of travel, materials and childcare. Others have adopted more innovative schemes, such as savings schemes to help students manage course costs and incentives (e.g. free travel) for those completing a target number of hours (Martinez & Munday, 1998:100).

In relation to broader college support services, it has been found that students are generally aware that these services exist but do not always know how to access them (Martinez & Munday, 1998:102). Moreover, there can be a fear of becoming stigmatised that may prevent some students from accessing these services. The most effective student support services appear to exist where there are clear roles, responsibilities and procedures for course teams and dedicated support staff. For instance, 'in some colleges student services are actively involved in induction programmes and activities which support transition... Counselling staff offer advice to personal tutors on counselling, interpersonal and tutoring skills; careers guidance staff provide exit interviews and positive guidance for students wishing to withdraw' (*ibid*). Alongside formal college support services, Moxley *et al* (2001) suggest that teaching staff can offer emotional support and sustenance (e.g. by offering sympathetic understanding to students when they face challenges or feel stressed and anxious), informational support (e.g. providing practical information to help them ‘make it’ as students), instrumental support (e.g. helping to resolve any problems the student encounters), and identity support (e.g. by valuing cultural diversity).

In sum, there are many different aspects to student support and their importance for individual students will vary according to what the particular support needs of that student are. From the point of view of the college, it is important that the full range of student support services are available and accessible; that students are kept well informed about these and that there is no stigma in accessing these services. Because it is more likely to be universally available, tutorial support has been seen as being a particularly important aspect of student support. Tutorials may be the first point of call for students when they are having difficulties and are therefore key for the early identification of problems and for referring students on to appropriate sources of help.

College environment

Martinez and Munday’s survey of over 8,500 students in 33 colleges concluded that college activities and facilities which develop supportive relations and a sense of belonging ‘can be crucially important’. However, in many colleges this was found to be lacking:

> *Students criticised the lack of social facilities and saw it as contributing to poor attendance; staff pointed to the distractions of town-centre sites. While*

> *some colleges have established clubs and societies which help students extend their friendships and interests, students are not always well informed about recreational activities or the student union.*
>
> (Martinez & Munday, 1998:102-3)

Indeed, alongside timetabling, the college social environment featured as the most frequently mentioned student 'dislike' in this study. Lack of childcare facilities and noisy study centres were also highlighted as aspects of the college environment with which students were dissatisfied. In relation to recreational and enrichment activities that can enhance the college environment for students, Martinez and Munday advocated that more colleges set up student liaison teams to develop joint initiatives with the student union. McGivney (1996a:112 & 128) also stressed the importance of the institutional environment, physically and socially, in improving student retention.

Martinez in his research (1996) recommended improvements to college facilities; and Barwuah and Munday reported how one college had 'introduced a college-wide student council, significantly improved the quality of its buildings and environment, and supported an extensive sports and arts programme' (1997:67) as part of its strategy to improve retention. McDougall (2001) also reported on a number of initiatives designed to improve retention by addressing aspects of the social environment. These included outdoor activity days for staff and students on all non-advanced full-time courses and confidence building programmes. Another important aspect of the college environment is ensuring that all students have equal access, regardless of physical impairment or any learning difficulties they may have (in line with the Disability Discrimination Act). This may necessitate 'modification to the physical, interpersonal or cultural environment of the learning situation to facilitate the productive participation... of those whose characteristics or qualities may exclude them from such participation' (Moxley *et al*, 2001:81).

The literature makes clear that the college environment encompasses much more than just the physical qualities of college buildings. A good college environment is one which provides an environment that supports learning and which provides students with a range of social and recreational opportunities. In short, it is about making the college a place where students want to be: the more attractive the college is as a place to be, the more likely students are to be retained; although, as Tinto observed, it is important that students are integrated into *both* the academic and social dimensions of college life.

Quality assurance

Two reports by Ofsted, examining why colleges fail (Ofsted, 2004a) and why colleges succeed (Ofsted, 2004b), identified student retention rates as a key indicator of how well colleges are performing. These studies were based upon evidence from inspections of 307 FE colleges and 42 independent specialist colleges between 2001 and 2004, and examined the factors that set apart the 29 best performing colleges in inspection (the top 8 per cent) and the 45 poorest performing colleges (the bottom 13 per cent). Effective quality assurance processes were one of the key strategies identified by Ofsted for improving student retention:

> *Good retention and subsequent high pass rates do not, therefore, occur by accident. On the contrary, they are the result of rigorous and regular monitoring, self-critical analysis and speedy intervention where necessary: Attendance and punctuality are monitored closely through the electronic register system. Students identified as being at risk or underperforming are given appropriate support, as necessary. Many are given specific workshop time with access to teachers on an individual basis and attendance at these workshops is monitored carefully. The system is robust and effective and clearly understood by students.*
>
> (Ofsted, 2004b:7)

Conversely, in failing colleges, there was found to be an 'absence of a self-reflective and self-critical culture, with no lead from the top' and 'Course teams' use and awareness of targets for retention and pass rates are low' (Ofsted, 2004a:12).

As the above quote from Ofsted indicates, good quality assurance is a product of both the management culture within colleges and the effectiveness of the systems and practices in place to continuously monitor, evaluate and improve. For example, Bowen *et al* (2005) found that the use of electronic attendance monitoring systems can promote approaches to enhance student retention, provided that data is 'acted upon and fed back into the planning system to improve the higher education experience' (2005:384). However, student tracking systems need to be implemented sensitively, so as not to alienate students, and it is also important that they accepted as valid by teaching staff (Martinez, 1997a; Martinez & Munday, 1998).

An important aspect of quality assurance highlighted by Ofsted is internal arrangements for monitoring equal opportunities and the promotion of inclusion and diversity. In 'exemplary' cases this means that 'Senior managers and frequently governors play an active role in overseeing the development and implementation of policies and practices. These are well communicated to both staff and students, and there is explicit reference to issues of equality in the everyday life of the college and through the taught curriculum' (Ofsted, 2004b:14). Where equal opportunities policies are effectively implemented this should improve the implementation of some of the other nine retention strategies being considered here. Thus, 'Equality of opportunity permeates the life of the college. The equal opportunity policy is carefully explained to students during induction and the values within the policy are reinforced through specific activities during tutorial and lessons...Teaching takes explicit account of students' varied backgrounds and encourages a multi-cultural perspective' (*ibid*:14).

Other aspects of quality assurance highlighted by Ofsted were target setting to improve retention and achievement, with all staff being 'fully aware of the targets set for their particular course and how present performance compares with national averages and the college's own performance in preceding years' (*ibid*: 17-18; see also Barwuah *et al*, 1997, Martinez & Munday, 1998); curriculum self-assessment reporting procedures which are subject to thorough internal validation; strong staff engagement with and support for the college's quality assurance framework; rigorous internal lesson observations and peer observation programmes; regular staff appraisal; the appointment of well qualified specialist staff; a strong emphasis on staff development and training; the use of 'advanced practitioners' within the college to spread good practice; and reliable management information systems to enable 'Governors, managers and course teams [to] use a wide range of statistical reports to judge the quality of provision... to monitor recruitment, retention and pass rates, and to inform planning' (*ibid*: 16). The profiling and monitoring of students particularly 'at risk' of drop-out is a specific way in which Management Information Systems can be used to target support and early intervention for more vulnerable students (Barwuah *et al*, 1997; Martinez & Munday, 1998; Vallender, 1998).

The importance of staff development as a means for improving student retention was also highlighted by Martinez (1998) and by Martinez, Houghton and Krupska (1998). Drawing on examples of good practice identified through the Further Education Development Agency, these authors found evidence that 'gives considerable support to the view that colleges need to focus on professional in-house staff development for all, particularly their teachers, if their retention strategies are going to be successful' (Martinez, Houghton & Krupska, 1998: 42). While the report concluded that in each college the content of staff development programmes needs to be determined by local needs and issues, the following nine 'major elements' of staff development strategies were identified:

- awareness raising and information giving;
- rolling programmes of teacher education and induction;
- courses to develop specialist skills (e.g. basic or special needs education, teaching key skills);
- tutor development programmes;
- business support staff development programmes;
- peer observation, feedback, mentoring and coaching;
- professional support and leadership from curriculum managers;
- systematic teacher development programmes to address local priorities;
- action research (*ibid*:42).

However, staff development activity is presented as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for colleges to improve retention rates: 'staff development without a college retention strategy will be ineffective. In large measure, the staff development activities reviewed here were successful because they were carefully planned within the context of an overall strategy, associated with a high profile managerial commitment, and could be seen to form part of a coherent set of interventions' (*ibid*:43). Similarly, Moxley at al (2001) stressed the importance of retention becoming established as an institutional aim and priority.

Another important dimension of quality assurance, which intersects with course management and communication, is obtaining student feedback on aspects of provision important to their experience. This feedback needs to be reviewed at course team level, alongside the feedback of moderators, external verifiers and course team members themselves (Martinez & Munday, 1998).

To summarise, there is a strongly articulated official view (from Ofsted) that quality assurance processes are key to improving student retention. This is backed up by the limited amount of research evidence in this area, particularly in relation to staff development. Quality assurance processes are wide ranging, covering such varied interventions as electronic register systems, equal opportunities policies, staff development and responding to student feedback. As such, quality assurance processes overlap with many (if not all) of the other eight retention strategies being investigated in this thesis – a fact which could potentially serve either to heighten or diminish their visibility to students and staff.

Bringing the retention strategies together

It can be seen from the foregoing discussion that none of the nine retention strategies being investigated operates in isolation from the others – rather the different strategies have areas of overlap and the potential to be mutually reinforcing. This suggests that approaches to retention are likely to be more successful if they encompass a variety of strategies rather than focussing on just one area. The importance of implementing an array of strategies is suggested by Fitzcharles' (2001) literature review and survey of students at Cumbernauld College. The strategies being implemented in this college to improve retention rates included pre-entry guidance, clarifying entry criteria, on-course monitoring for early signs of 'at-risk' students, continued on-course guidance, support and reviews of student progress, assessment of core skills, and pre-exit guidance. Fitzcharles concluded that colleges should: acknowledge student non-completion as an issue; investigate local causes of non-completion; develop and apply retention strategies across the whole or part of the college; evaluate progress; and engage in continuous development. Furthermore, Martinez (1997a) suggested that the most effective combinations of strategies are those that incorporate elements of bottom-up and top-down approaches, so that all levels of staff within colleges are actively engaged in efforts to improve retention.

Implementing new retention strategies within a college, or even within a single college department, is never an easy task. The strategies discussed here need to be adapted to the particular circumstances and needs that are present within each college (Martinez, Houghton & Krupska, 1998). It is also important to recognise that successfully implementing new strategies is a 'difficult and sensitive process' because it involves changing established 'cultures and teacher expectations [which] are significant, deeply imbedded, value laden' (Martinez, 1997a:8).

Beatty-Guenter's Typology of Retention Strategies

Beatty-Guenter (1994) has produced a typology of different retention strategies in an attempt to aid 'understanding of how each strategy is related to other strategies' (1994:113). The purposes of different retention strategies are seen as fitting one of four categories:

- **Sorting strategies**, such as college admission policies, are those that seek to ensure that students are placed into the right groupings (e.g. making sure that the subject is suitable for them and that they are on the appropriate level of course);
- **Supporting strategies** are those that 'strive to ease students' problems with the aspects of everyday life, making it more likely that they will be able to maintain their status as students' (1994:117), e.g. financial support, childcare services and health and wellness programmes;
- **Connecting strategies** encompass activities which 'foster bonding between a student and the institution' creating 'opportunities for a student to become linked with the college community, and to feel membership of that community' (1994:118). Connecting strategies are therefore about the social integration of students with other students (cf. Tinto, 1975) as well as formal college programmes, such as induction, which seek to connect the student with the college;
- **Transforming strategies** are those that are concerned most directly with processes of teaching and learning. These are sub-divided into strategies for *transforming students* (e.g. motivating students to become effective and successful learners, particularly where they may have experienced

educational failure in the past) and strategies for *transforming institutions* (e.g. strategies concerned with curriculum change, staff development and facilitating learning communities within colleges).

This typology of retention strategies is then used by Beatty-Guenter to argue for comprehensive and balanced approaches to tackling the problem of student attrition:

> *'Effective retention programs must involve strategies of sorting, supporting, connecting and transforming in order to be truly effective. A lop-sided program that concentrates activities in only one category will fail to provide the range of techniques to address the range of student problems that contribute to attrition'*
> (Beatty-Guenter, 1994:125-6)

It appeared from my preliminary investigation at colleges A and B that these colleges had already done quite a lot to implement most of the strategies recommended by researchers. However, despite these efforts to implement retention strategies the issue of student retention still remained. Improving student retention therefore continues to be a pressing issue for these colleges, from the point of view of raising student achievement and the funding pressures that colleges are under.

Gaps in Current Research

There is an extensive literature on student retention in further and higher education which, since Tinto's early work in American higher education, has focussed in the main on attempting to identify and explain the causes of student drop-out. More recently researchers have supplemented these inquiries with a concern to specify what the implications are for developing strategies to improve student retention. However, research on retention has yet to examine how effectively different strategies aimed at promoting student retention in FE colleges have been implemented, and further research needs to be carried out into the ways in which these strategies are being implemented.

It is also interesting to note that the amount of research into student retention, certainly within Further Education in England, appears to have tailed off during the last five years or so. This may reflect the changing context of FE, in which there has been an intensification of college monitoring of student retention and achievement since the late 1990s. As indicated in the previous chapter, this trend towards greater self-assessment and monitoring seems set to continue. In this context it may be that researchers perceive that there is now a surfeit of data on student retention and that there is consequently less need for investigation into this area. However, while this may be true, and while it may also be felt that the limits have been reached in terms of explaining student drop-out, the implementation of strategies for improving retention remains an under-explored area. The main research question for this thesis therefore looks at how effectively the two colleges in my study are implementing strategies to promote student retention.

Thesis Research Questions

This thesis will investigate how effectively nine key retention strategies identified through my literature review are being implemented in the Business departments of two London FE colleges. These strategies are student recruitment and induction, course management, student motivation, communication, teaching and learning, course assessment, student support, the college environment and quality assurance. The main areas of investigation lead to the following research questions:

1. To identify the strategies currently used by two FE colleges to promote retention;
2. To examine student and staff perceptions of nine key retention strategies identified in the literature and through my initial investigation;
3. To investigate how effectively these strategies are being implemented;
4. To identify implications for improving practice that can be implemented across FE colleges.

These research questions have guided the collection and analysis of data in Colleges A and B and will be referred to in the reporting of my findings in chapters 4 and 5. Before examining the findings of the research, the methodology used to carry out the investigation will be discussed.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

Educational research is a field of social science research that undertakes 'the collection and analysis of information on the world of education so as to understand and explain it better' (Opie, 2004a:3). Research in education should be relevant to practising teachers in that it should be:

> *'viewed as critical, reflexive, and professionally orientated activity... regarded as a crucial ingredient in the teacher's professional role... generating self-knowledge and personal development in such a way that practice can be improved'*
>
> (Hitchcock and Hughes, in Opie, 2004a:3)

Thus, educational research is a problem-solving activity (Anderson with Arsenault, 1998) that is concerned with seeking answers to established 'problems' or 'issues' in education, asking new questions about these issues (looking at things in a different way), or posing completely new questions for the teaching profession and raising new issues by 'making the familiar strange' (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002:45). The main aim of this thesis is to explore a well-established problem, that of student drop-out in Further Education, but to do so from an angle that has received relatively little attention up until now: looking at how effectively different strategies for improving student retention are being implemented.

This chapter describes the methods used in conducting the research, the issues considered along the way and the actual processes experienced in the process of developing the approach.

General Considerations in the Design of the Research

A mixed methods approach

In order to answer my central research question ('How effective are strategies aimed at promoting student retention in Further Education Colleges?') I identified the following key areas that I needed to find out about:

i. The causes of student drop-out in Further Education;
ii. The main strategies that have been recommended for improving student retention;
iii. How these strategies have been implemented in particular further education contexts; and
iv. How effective this implementation had been within these contexts.

These were the broad starting points for the development of my thesis research questions, outlined at the end of Chapter 2. To find out about (i) and (ii), and to lay the foundation for this investigation, it was clear that I would need to undertake a literature review of previous research on student retention in order to 'refine and build upon the work of those who have come before' (Birmingham, 2000:25; Hart, 1998). In relation to (iii) and (iv), I realised that I would have to identify a particular case (or cases) to study, and to obtain information about what retention strategies were being implemented and then to evaluate how effectively they were working. It did not seem that there was any one source of information, or a single research method, that could provide all of the data that I would need.

In the first instance, it determined that I would need to: examine official college documents, policies and statistics on retention; investigate the views of students on the implementation of retention strategies; investigate the views of teachers and managers on these retention strategies; and possibly also seek to observe these strategies being put into practice. Thus, I decided that I would have to bring different sources of information and viewpoints to bear on the same issue, and to work with different types of data (e.g. staff and student perceptions, college documents and my own observations). This led me to conclude that my research would employ a number of different research methods and that this would most likely include both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative research is concerned with the collection and analysis of data in numeric form and 'tends to emphasize relatively large-scale and representative sets of data' (Blaxter *et al*, 2001:64). This numeric data, which may be in the form of nominal, ordinal, interval or ratio data, can then be subjected to statistical analysis using specialist software such as SPSS. Some of the advantages of quantitative analysis are that: it can be thought of as a more 'scientific' approach (because these data can be analysed using principles derived from mathematics and probability); findings can be subjected to tests of statistical significance, providing an indication of the degree of confidence we can have in reported findings; findings are based upon measured quantities, which others can check for authenticity; large volumes of data can be analysed relatively quickly; and quantitative data can be presented in simple and effective forms such as through the use of charts and tables (Denscombe, 2003:264. See also ten Have, 2004:4). Key features of the quantitative paradigm are that it seeks 'facts' and to identify the causes of social phenomena, that it is 'objective' and based upon 'hard' replicable data, and that it is possible for findings to be generalised (Blaxter *et al*, 2001:65).

Qualitative research, on the other hand, emerged from the philosophical rejection of attempts to base social scientific research on the principles and techniques used in the natural sciences (Smeyers, 2002:191). It has been argued that the ideal of objectively measuring and explaining social phenomena using quantitative techniques has never been realised, giving rise to 'disenchantment' within the social sciences with the 'low degree of applicability of [quantitative] results and the problems of connecting them to theory and societal developments' (Flick, 2006:13). Qualitative approaches – which covers 'a variety of styles of social research, drawing on a variety of disciplines such as sociology, social anthropology and social psychology' (Denscombe, 2003:267) – have a particular focus instead on 'meanings and the way people understand things' and 'a concern with patterns of behaviour', whilst acknowledging that '*the researcher's self plays a significant role in the production and interpretation of qualitative data*' (*ibid*:268 – original emphasis. See also Gillham, 2000).

While quantitative and qualitative methods are sometimes thought of as being opposed, the importance of a 'mixed methods approach' has increasingly been emphasised in recent years. Mixed methods approaches 'involve the planned use of two or more different kinds of data gathering and analysis of techniques', where 'what is importantly mixed... extends beyond the numerical/quantitative or narrative/qualitative character of the different methods used' (Greene *et al*, 2005:274). In other words, there is an attempt to integrate the different methods within a single framework and set of priorities specified within the overall research design – although there are many different models for combining qualitative and quantitative methods and no 'right' way of doing this (Punch, 2005). The value of combining methods is that it allows for the triangulation of data (*ibid*), recognises the similarities between qualitative and quantitative approaches (Blaxter *et al*, 2001), is less constraining than relying upon a single method (Morse, 2003:195) and, crucially, strengthens the findings that are produced:

> *Combined methods of research, and the combination of data derived through different methods, has been identified by a variety of authorities as a key element in the improvement of social science, including education research. One of the key reasons advanced for this is that research claims are stronger when based on a variety of methods...*
>
> (Gorard with Taylor, 2004:7)

Such arguments convinced me of the need to use a mixed methods approach in my own investigation. It is important, however, that mixed methods are not adopted as an easy way out of the difficulties that have to be confronted in thoroughly analysing a single set of material (Silverman, 2005).

Practical considerations

As well as considering the paradigm and tools associated with quantitative and qualitative research I needed to take a practical view of conducting the research, in particular: would it be possible for the investigation to be carried out and within the specified time frame? This meant ensuring that enough time was allowed for structuring and planning the research, gathering the primary and secondary data and analysing the results. With this in mind the work was divided into stages, as recommended by Gough (2000), which was useful for time management and meeting set targets. As well as timing, the researcher also had to think at the planning stage about the costs of data gathering and hence sought cost-effective and efficient means of gathering the data (Wilkinson, 2000). This was achieved in part by using some of my own class time for collecting data. Conducting some of the research with students I was already teaching meant that it was relatively easy to gain access to the participants.

Furthermore, owing to my position as an insider, my colleagues in College A were very helpful in using their class periods to get their students to complete questionnaires for me. I also negotiated with my Faculty Director and Head of School to be released for a couple of hours during the week to conduct interviews, coupled with my use of lunch breaks to carry out some of the interviews. It was less easy for me to conduct my research in College B. However, because I obtained permission from the Principal and because I already knew some of the staff in College B it was relatively unproblematic for me to obtain access to the students and staff.

Validity and reliability

Validity refers to the degree to which a method, a test or research tool actually measures what is supposed to measure (Bell, 1999:104; Opie, 2004a:68). Questions of validity are different in quantitative and qualitative research. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003:13) identify seven basic types of validity in quantitative research and no fewer than fourteen types of validity in qualitative research. Broadly speaking:

> *With matters of measurement in quantitative research there are many threats to validity. In qualitative research the effort to ensure validity by narrowing the field of study to something which can be measured may have the effect of undermining the extent to which the outcomes can be generalised.*
>
> (Somekh & Lewin, 2005:349)

Validity is important not only for giving confidence in the research findings, but can also be seen as an ethical issue because it would be wrong to waste participants' time by asking them to participate in research that was not valid (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004:104).

An important aspect of *validity* for my own investigation, concerned as it is with gathering the views of staff and students on the implementation of retention strategies, is 'how do you know if the informant is telling the truth?'. Denscombe suggests the following checks that the researcher can undertake to help ensure the validity of their data: checking the transcript with the informant; checking the data with other sources; checking the plausibility of the data; and looking for themes in the data (Denscombe, 2003:186-7. See also Martinez & Munday, 1998:37). There were a number of different forms of triangulation which I undertook which can give confidence in the validity of the research tools. Firstly, there was triangulation of results generated through using different methods (e.g. comparing quantitative questionnaire results with qualitative data from focus group interviews). Secondly, I was able to 'test' my emerging findings through discussion with staff in the two colleges and also in supervision sessions with my supervisor. Thirdly, findings could be compared with existing data on the two colleges and also with the large body of research on retention issues. These forms of triangulation helped to give me confidence that the data collection techniques used actually captured the data I needed and that they were measuring what was intended and not something else.

I also considered the issue of *reliability* in my investigation which means 'that the truth of the findings has been established by ensuring that they are supported by sufficient and compelling evidence' (Somekh & Lewin, 2005:348). With quantitative data the notion of reliability refers specifically to 'the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions' (Bell, 1999:103). A reliable investigation is therefore one that has been 'carried out in such a way that, if another researcher were to look into the same questions in the same setting, they would come up with essentially the same results (though not necessarily an identical interpretation)' (Blaxter *et al*, 2001:221). The fact that my research was conducted in phases (as described below) helped to ensure the reliability of my methods as I did not take just one 'snapshot' of students' views but conducted several surveys with different groups of students over a two and a half year period. Carrying out a number of surveys over time in this way gave me confidence in the reliability of my approach as the main messages from students were strikingly consistent; it also allowed me to develop and improve my research instruments (for example, the wording of survey questions) with each successive phase over the 3 year period. Thus, I was able to remove questions which students had found unclear and/or where there was duplication, making the later versions of the questionnaires more 'user friendly' for students to complete. One student who completed two versions of my questionnaires said *"Miss, this is a better* *questionnaire, compared to last year's one. It's easy to fill and it took less time than the previous one"* (Student A15).

Another aspect of the reliability of my research was in seeking to adopt an *objective* approach to my investigation, that is 'approaching a topic with an open mind, avoiding bias and being prepared to submit research evidence to scrutiny by other researchers' (Browne, 1998:501). As a researcher I did not allow my personal views, beliefs, ethnic, or social background affect the way I carried out the research. My methodology was impersonal and not misleading, e.g. I tried to avoid the use of leading language or questions which could have led to biased responses (Brown, 1998). Presentations of my research at seminars, departmental meetings and regular meetings with my supervisors allowed my work to be assessed by others and these occasions proved useful for gaining feedback and making adjustments in my approach.

Ethical considerations

In order to conduct this thesis investigation in College A and B, I first needed to obtain the formal permission of the respective college principals and other staff. Following meetings about the research, letters of permission to carry out the investigation were secured from each of the colleges. In order to protect the anonymity of the participating colleges these are not reproduced here; however, appendix 1 shows a copy of the letters I wrote to the principals, faculty directors, other staff and students to explain the nature and purposes of the research (which also served to reassure participants of the voluntary nature of their involvement and about the confidentiality of their responses).

It is also important to state that College A agreed to fund this doctorate research; a college HRT manager wrote that 'It is felt to be an area of research very much in line with college developments'. The fact that the college was willing to support the research in this way, by allowing access to staff and students and use of college resources, demonstrates their commitment to the contribution of the research to the institution.

Given these considerations, and noting my steps to ensure informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, this investigation was conducted in accord with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004). As Sikes notes, 'any research that involves people has the potential to cause (usually unintentional) damage' (2004:25). This is especially true of research involving young people, some of whom may be considered 'vulnerable'. For this reason, the ethics of this investigation were a major consideration. Denscombe (2003: 136-138) suggests three underlying principles that should guide the activities of researchers:

Principle 1: The interests of participants should be protected – this refers to the need to ensure that participants do not come to physical or psychological harm as a result of the conduct of the research, and that the confidentiality of the participants is respected (see also Gregory, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004:110; McNamee, 2002). This I addressed by:

- creating a friendly atmosphere when interviewing students and staff;
- choosing appropriate moments in which to carry out the research (for example, collecting data at points during the term when students and staff where not under pressure with assignment deadlines and marking);
- always taking the time to explain to students and staff why they were being asked to participate in the research;
- and assuring students and staff of the confidentiality of their responses. This I did by making it clear that I did not require students' names on questionnaires (and I did not provide a space for this, as can be seen in appendix 2). To further reinforce the message of confidentiality I ensured that all the completed questionnaires were sealed in an envelope for collection by me. I was pleased to have provided this facility as it was used by all the students returning the questionnaire and if I had not included this option then a lower response rate might have resulted.

In these ways I made sure that the emotional, psychological and social security of the participants was not at risk. I felt a particular responsibility for this because, for the surveys and interviews with students in my own college, I effectively had a dual role as 'gatekeeper' to the students (Homan, 2002) and researcher. I also took care not to identify the two colleges involved in the research, by using the pseudonyms 'College A' and 'College B' in writing up the research.

Principle 2: Researchers should avoid deception and misrepresentation – this principle applies both to the conduct of fieldwork (by being honest and open with the research participants) and also to the writing-up and reporting of the research findings. This I did by conducting the data collection and analysis with integrity and by reporting the findings accurately. To help me to represent the data fairly and accurately I periodically discussed my emerging findings with colleagues in both colleges, to check that the data and my interpretations of it were fair. This was particularly important in College B, with which I was less familiar.

Principle 3: Participants should give informed consent – this means that 'participation must always be voluntary, and [people] must have sufficient information about the research to arrive at a reasoned judgement about whether or not they want to participate' (Denscombe, 2003:138. See also Cohen *et al*, 2007:52; Gregory, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004:104; Mason, 2002:80-82; McNamee, 2002). This was less of an issue with the staff in the two colleges, who were naturally interested in why I was carrying out this research and were positive about participating in order to help me with my EdD studies. It was a different matter with students, however, and I had to explain carefully to them that the questionnaire surveys, interviews and focus group were something separate from college or department feedback exercises. As well as verbally explaining this to students, I also provided a covering letter with each of the questionnaires that set out why they were being asked to participate in these activities (see appendix 1).

In addition to these principles, the most recent BERA ethical guidelines stipulate that 'Researchers must recognise the right of any participant to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time, and they must inform them of this right' (2004:6) – this was something that I made clear to all of the participants. In relation to working with children, vulnerable young people and vulnerable adults, the BERA guidelines also state that 'Researchers must recognise that participants may experience distress or discomfort in the research process and must take all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion and put them at ease. They must desist immediately from any actions, ensuing from the research process, that cause emotional or other harm' (*ibid*:7-8). This final ethical consideration led me to be very careful to stick to the central focus of my research, by keeping my questions to students firmly fixed on the implementation of retention strategies, and not probing about aspects of their personal lives or financial circumstances which might have put them at risk of dropping out (because my inquiry was not concerned with investigating the causes of student withdrawal).

Being an 'insider' who was conducting research in College A had ethical implications for the conduct of the research. This was particularly an issue in relation to the interviews conducted with staff, as there was some reticence among staff to speak openly to a fellow colleague about the effectiveness of college policies on retention (despite reassurances being given of confidentiality). Some were concerned that they might be judged negatively if it appeared that they were not fully implementing college policies. It was therefore important that I gained their trust in my impartiality. On the positive side, the majority of colleagues were willing to participate and my 'insider knowledge' gave me additional understanding of the college to be able to interpret and compare their views.

Choice of Research Methods

This section will describe the different options considered in choosing to use questionnaires and interviews for this research, briefly describing how each method was used and explaining why other methods were not chosen.

Case Studies

Considerations

'A case study is a specific instance that is frequently designed to illustrate a more general principle' (Nisbet & Watt in Cohen *et al*, 2007:253). Cases can be defined at different levels, such as that of the individual, a group, institution or community (Gillham, 2000). Case studies are not associated with a particular research method (Stark & Torrence, 2005), but rather represent 'a broad approach to social research, with an underlying rationale for the direction and planning of an investigation that separates it from the rationale for survey research or the rationale for experimental research' (Denscombe, 2003:30). The key features of this approach are: a focus on one instance or a small number of instances; in-depth study of the case; a focus on relationships and processes in order to investigate a specific context in detail; the investigation of a 'natural setting' (that is, the case is something that already exists and has not been set up by the researcher); and the use of multiple sources and multiple methods (*ibid*:30-31. See also Gillham, 2000). With regard to this final feature, Denscombe suggests that a case study approach 'invites and encourages' the use of mixed methods:

> *Observations of events within the case study setting can be combined with the collection of documents from official meetings and informal interviews with people involved. Questionnaires might be used to provide information on a particular point of interest. Whatever is appropriate can be used for investigating the relationships and processes that are of interest.*
>
> (Denscombe, 2003:31)

Case studies can be categorised as belonging to one of six types, distinguished by the number of cases and purposes of the study (figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Types of case studies (adapted from Yin, 1993)

	Number of cases	
Purpose of case study	Exploratory *Single Case*	Exploratory *Multiple cases*
	Descriptive *Single Case*	Descriptive *Multiple cases*
	Explanatory *Single Case*	Explanatory *Multiple cases*

The advantages of using case studies are that they: are drawn from people's experiences and practices, 'and so are seen to be strong in reality'; allow for generalisations to be made from a specific instance; demonstrate the complexity of social life; lend themselves to further development (for example, researchers can return to the case and update the case study at a later date); and case study data which is close to people's experiences 'can be more persuasive and accessible' (Blaxter *et al*, 2003:73). The main disadvantages are that the very complexity of a case can make analysis difficult, with an excess of apparently 'relevant' contextual information (*ibid*), generalisability may be difficult (Bryman, 2004:51; Neuman, 2003:33), case studies are not easily open to cross-checking, and they are prone to problems of observer bias (Cohen *et al*, 2007:256).

How a case study approach was used in this investigation

Bearing in mind the complexity of the issue of student retention, in terms both of the large number of factors that have been found to be associated with student drop-out and the wide range of strategies that have been proposed for improving student retention (see Chapter 2), It was decided that a case study approach would be central to my thesis investigation. Looking at one or two cases in detail offered a promising way of capturing this complexity, which would have to take into account of the views of students, their teachers and course managers, as well as departmental and college-wide factors. A case study approach was also attractive because it permits the use of a range of methods, which had already been identified as important. Finally, from a practical point of view, a case study approach appeared feasible for my small-scale study. As Blaxter *et al* have observed:

> *The case study is, in many ways, ideally suited to the needs and resources of the small-scale researcher. It allows, indeed endorses, a focus on just one example, or perhaps just two or three. This might be the researcher's place of work, or another institution with which they have a connection…*
>
> (Blaxter *et al*, 2003:71)

Initially I thought of exploring a single case study in depth, taking the Business department in the college in which I worked as the case. However, my literature review made me increasingly aware that college-level policies and strategies are also very important. For this reason I opted for a dual case study approach, selecting as my second case a Business department within a very different college to my own (in that it was a much smaller Sixth Form

College rather than a large General Further Education College), but which had a comparable intake of predominantly ethnic minority students. In this way I planned to contrast the implementation of retention strategies in the Business departments of College A and College B. In the terms of figure 3.1, above, my study could be classified as *a descriptive case study approach with two cases*. While the primary purpose would be to *describe* the implementation of retention strategies within the two case study sites, I anticipated that the investigation would also have some exploratory and explanatory features as well (for example, I hoped to identify differences between the two cases and also to come up with explanations for why these differences might exist).

Surveys

Considerations

'Surveys', as the French author Michel de Certeau commented, 'are everywhere' (quoted in O'Leary, 2005:103). The prevalence of surveys in our daily lives, from market research to social science research, can make it easy to fall into the trap of thinking that designing and conducting a survey is simple and straightforward (Opie, 2004b:95; Blaxter *et al*, 2001:179). However, it was apparent from reading and thinking about surveys for this research that there was a great deal to take into consideration.

Surveys can be defined as 'The process of collecting data by asking a range of individuals the same questions related to their characteristics, attributes, how they live, or their opinions' (O'Leary, 2005:103). The main advantages of questionnaires, as the most common type of survey, are that they are 'relatively economical, respondents in distant locations can be reached, the questions are standardised, anonymity can be assured, and questions can be written for specific purposes' (Opie, 2004b:95). General difficulties with surveys are that data are affected by the characteristics of the respondents (for example, their knowledge, experience and motivation) and respondents may not necessarily answer accurately or honestly (Robson, 2003:233).

As O'Leary (2005) shows, there are a number of different types of surveys. In terms of the *method of administering the survey*, there are at least three basic types (face-to-face surveys, telephone surveys and self-completion surveys – the latter of which can be paper-based or done online via email or the internet). There are also *temporal dimensions to surveys*, with single snapshot surveys, trend surveys (asking similar groups of respondents the same questions over time) and panel surveys (asking the same people questions at two or more points in time). The *scope of a survey* also has to be established, that is whether it is to be targeted at a whole population (for example, the census) or, more commonly, a sample or cross-section of a population. Finally, we can distinguish between different *purposes of surveys*, which can also be related to the types of case study outlined in figure 3.1 (exploratory, descriptive and explanatory).

Survey design is a large and well-developed area of social science research and, even within one sub-set of this area, 'The field of questionnaire design is vast' (Cohen *et al*, 2007:317). I will focus here on issues related to questionnaire design because 'it is the most widely used procedure for obtaining information' (Opie, 2004b:95) and because I selected self-completion questionnaires as one of my central research tools. Some of the most important considerations in questionnaire design can be summarised as follows:

- *Sampling* – The main considerations are determining the size and nature of the sample and how this is to be selected. 'Generally speaking, the larger the sample the better, as this not only gives greater reliability but also enables more sophisticated statistics to be used' (Cohen *et al*, 2007:101). There are many different forms of probability and non-probability sampling, and researchers need to think about how they will select their sample and about the representativeness of the sample (Cohen *et al*, 2007; Opie, 2004b; Punch, 2005).

- *Type of questions* – The main consideration here is whether to use 'closed' questions, where respondents are offered a choice of pre-determined replies, or 'open' questions which allow a free response (Opie, 2004b; Bryman, 2004).

- *Question wording* – The wording of questions is 'one of the most difficult features of questionnaire design' (Denscombe, 2003:152). Some of the key points to consider are: identifying the key issues which you will ask about; asking questions which respondents will have the information to be able to respond to; ensuring that the questions will be intelligible to the target group; asking about matters which respondents can be expected to have direct experience of; avoiding highly personal or sensitive issues; avoiding leading questions; ensuring that questions are unambiguous and precise; making sure that questions are not duplicated; providing sufficient options in the answer categories; avoiding technical jargon; making questions as simple and straightforward as possible; not making unwarranted presumptions; avoiding double-barrelled questions; and not asking questions which may cause offence (Blaxter *et al*, 2001; Bryman, 2004; Cohen *et al*, 2007; Denscombe, 2003; Robson, 2003).

- *Question ordering* – The ordering of questions is important because, for example, questions asked early on may influence the way in which respondents answer later questions. If more difficult questions are asked at the beginning then this may put some people off from continuing with the questionnaire (Cohen *et al*, 2007; Denscombe, 2003).

- *Layout* – Important considerations about the layout of the questionnaire include: providing a clear typed layout which 'invites' the respondent to read and respond to the questions; providing clear instructions as to how the questionnaire should be filled in; ensuring that there is suitable spacing between questions and enough space to provide answers to 'open' questions; making sure that questions are clearly numbered; allocating a serial number to each questionnaire; providing background information to the respondent about the questionnaire (for example, setting out the purpose of the questionnaire and who it is for); and thanking respondents for giving their time to fill it in (Blaxter *et al*, 2001; Cohen *et al*, 2007; Denscombe, 2003; Opie, 2004b).

- *Length* – It is important to keep the questionnaire focussed on the key issues so that overall it is kept to a reasonable length, to make responding as easy as possible (Denscombe, 2003).

- *Piloting* – Finally, it is very important to test out the questionnaire in a pilot study in order to: check the clarity of questionnaire items, instructions and layout; gain feedback on the validity of questionnaire items; and eliminate ambiguities or difficulties in wording (Bryman, 2004; Cohen *et al*, 2007; Opie, 2004b; Robson, 2003).

How surveys were used in this investigation

Surveys, in the form of self-completion questionnaires, were used as my primary form of data collection with students. I chose this method because I wanted to obtain the views of a large number of students in the two college Business departments. It was important that my questionnaires were designed for self-completion because it was not possible for me to be present on all occasions when students were filling them in, particularly in College B. I wanted to ensure that all students answered the same questions in the same way. This meant that it was important that I explained clearly to the teaching staff in College B how to introduce the questionnaires to students, how long to give them to complete them and how to deal with any questions. Across the three different questionnaires I used (developed for my initial investigation and with the first and second cohorts of students surveyed in each college) I was able to obtain the views of a total of 419 students on level 2 and level 3 courses (see table 3.1 below).

If the work of my preliminary investigation is counted, I developed a total of four different versions of questionnaires with students. While each had different purposes linked to particular stages of the research (described below), this was also a *developmental process* for me as a new researcher: with each successive survey I learned more about what worked and so made improvements to each questionnaire. This learning process was aided by asking students to give me feedback on their experience of completing the questionnaires. For example, several students among the first cohort surveyed indicated that they had found the questionnaire too long. In response to this feedback I made sure that the next questionnaire (with the second cohort of students) was shorter. During the course of the research I also came to appreciate more fully the value of using open questions for exploratory work (for example, identifying issues during the preliminary investigation) and also for gaining additional detail from students about their views of particular strategies. Conversely, I learned the value of using tightly structured closed questions to facilitate systematic comparisons between the different retention strategies. As I developed these research instruments I felt that the quality of responses achieved was enhanced (e.g. students gave the questionnaires more attention when they were shorter, as they were less likely to become bored filling them in).

Survey samples

Other than during my initial investigations, when I was willing to settle for a smaller sample size because this was exploratory work, my aim was to survey as many students as possible on level 2 and 3 Business courses within Colleges A and B. I would have liked to have surveyed the entire population of these groups on each occasion, but the major obstacle to this was finding the time within classes for students to complete questionnaires (particularly in College B and for groups I did not teach in College A, where the teachers concerned had less incentive to find the time for students to complete the questionnaires for me). I had most success with the final survey, for which I managed to get students from 7 out of 10 groups in College A, and 6 out of 8 groups in College B, to complete my questionnaires.

Table 3.2 provides an overview of the method, rationale, sample and response rate for each of my surveys. Response rate here refers to the proportion of students *from the registers of each participating group* who completed the questionnaires. The achieved response rates of 74% to 84% are largely a reflection of rates of student attendance on the days on which the surveys were administered, as only a handful of students who were present chose not to fill in the questionnaires.

Table 3.2: Summary of methods, samples and response rates in student students

Method	Rationale	Sample	Response Rate
Short self-completion questionnaire, using mainly open questions	Exploratory exercise as part of my initial investigation to find out about student characteristics, motivations, intentions of completing their course and understanding of college measures to improve retention.	68 students responded from level 2 and level 3 Business courses in College A, from a selection of groups I was teaching (total of 81 students on the registers).	84% response
Longer self-completion questionnaire, using mainly closed questions	This **survey with the first cohort of students** explored students experiences of 9 retention strategies and views on their implementation.	133 students (63 from College A; 70 from College B) in groups I could gain access to (total of 180 students on the registers).	74% response
Self-completion questionnaire, using mainly closed questions	This **survey with the second survey of students** sought to find out more systematically how students evaluated the implementation of 9 strategies (eg. using a common scale throughout).	218 students (114 from College A; 104 from College B). Sample drawn from 290 students on the register (7 out of 10 groups in College A and 6 out of 8 groups in College B).	76 % response

Interviews and focus groups

Considerations

Interviewing is generally used for more exploratory and in-depth investigations than it is usually possible to achieve through the use of questionnaires or other types of survey:

> *The use of interviews normally means that the researcher has reached the decision that, for the purposes of the particular project in mind, the research would be better served by getting material which provides more of an in-depth insight into the topic, drawing on information provided by fewer informants.* (Denscombe, 2003:164).

Interviews are therefore a suitable option in doing preparatory work for questionnaires, as a follow-up to a questionnaire (to explore certain lines of enquiry in greater depth) and as a form of triangulation with other methods (*ibid*:166). The use of interviews, of course, is also a well-established method in its own right and does not have to be seen as a method which merely supplements other methods.

Interviews can be classified according to whether they are *structured* (in which there is tight control over the interview questions and responses, much like closed survey questions), *semi-structured* (in which questions are more open but the interview follows a clear list of questions) or *unstructured* (Cohen *et al*, 2007; Denscombe, 2003; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Opie, 2004b; Silverman, 2005). We can also distinguish between different types of interview, such as one-to-one interviews, group interviews and focus groups. Beyond these practical considerations there are also decisions to be made about the approach to interviewing that is to be employed. Approaches to interviewing include: *focused interviews*, in which the interviewee is presented with a stimuli (for example a short film) and asked to respond to specific questions about that stimuli; *problem-centred interviews*, in which the interviewer collects biographical data around a particular research problem; *expert interviews*, in which the main focus is on gaining knowledge from an interviewee with expertise in a particular field; *ethnographic interviews*, as part of a participant observation approach; *oral history interviews*; and even *post-modern interviews* (Flick, 2006; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 2002).

Some of the main advantages of interviews are the depth of information and insights they can provide, their orientation towards the interviewees' priorities, their flexibility and high response rates (Denscombe, 2003). However, drawbacks can be that interviews are time-consuming (to conduct, transcribe and analyse), that open (that is, un-coded) data is more difficult to analyse, that the data is susceptible to the influence of the interviewer (and therefore its reliability can be questioned) and individuals can be inhibited by or feel uncomfortable about the process of being interviewed (Blaxter *et al*, 2001; Denscombe, 2003). It is crucial then that the interviewer is sensitive to the power differentials at play in research interviews (for example, between an adult interviewer and a child or young person being interviewed) and that the interviewee feels able to trust the interviewer (Barbour & Schostak, 2005).

Focus groups, as an important sub-set of interviews, rely upon 'the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher... yielding a collective rather than an individual view' (Cohen *et al*, 2007:376). They are useful for triangulating with more traditional methods such as surveys and one-to-one interviews (*ibid*:377), but present difficulties in terms of how best 'to document the data in a way that allows the identification of individual speakers and the differentiation between statements of several parallel speakers' (Flick, 2006:199; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). The skills of the moderator in facilitating a focus group discussion, who must neither lead the discussion too much nor let it run out of control, is crucial to the success of focus group research (Anderson with Arsenault, 1998; Greenbaum, 1998).

How interviews and focus groups were used in this investigation

Interviews with students and staff were used in my preliminary investigation (see below on the sequences in the research), to help in the identification of strategies for improving student retention. I later used interviews in my main investigation as (a) my primary means of obtaining the views of the teaching staff and managers in Colleges A and B, and (b) as a way of deepening my data on students' views on the implementation of retention strategies. All of these interviews were semi-structured and conducted on a one-to-one basis, as I felt that this approach would enable the interviewees to feel comfortable while allowing me to probe on the issues I was interested in (linked closely to the main types of retention strategy I was investigating). With the exception of the staff in College B, who were more difficult to get hold of, all of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, which I felt was important for establishing a good rapport with interviewees and gaining their trust. Telephone interviews were conducted with some of the College B staff instead, although I found that I generally received shorter responses using this method. In addition to the one-to-one interviews, I also held one focus group discussion with a group of students in College A. The main purpose of this focus group interview was as a means of triangulation with the data collected through the one-to-one interviews and self-completion questionnaires.

Interview and focus group samples

In the course of my main investigation I sought to interview a total of 20 college staff in the Business departments of College A and B (10 members of staff from each college). I wanted to limit the number of interviews to 20 because I was concerned that if I tried to interview all of the staff in the two college departments that I would end up with more in-depth data than I could handle. In the event it proved difficult to meet up with the staff in College B for face-to-face interviews, so 5 of these interviews were conducted by telephone and the other 5 were administered as self-completion questionnaires instead (using exactly the same questions). These 20 staff represented a non-random sample of the staff in the Business departments in each college: I targeted those staff in each college who had been at the colleges for longest (these also tended to be the full-time members of staff). The reason for this was that I wanted to get the views of the staff who had the greatest knowledge and experience of the colleges and their strategies, as well as of their students.

Interviews with students were conducted with a sub-sample of 55 out of the 218 students who participated in my second questionnaire survey (involving 26 students from College A and 29 students from College B). In addition, I held one focus group interview with a group of 20 students in College A. The basis for the selection of which students to interview was largely dictated by practical considerations such as the availability of groups of students to participate, and so was not strictly a random selection (although, to all intents and purposes, this was quite a random way for the participants to be selected). Similarly with the focus group in College A, the primary consideration was the practical issue of when this could be fitted in most conveniently within the constraints of the students' timetable, workload and other pressures on my time.

A summary of the methods and sample selection used in the staff and student interviews (excluding those undertaken during my preliminary investigation) is shown in table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Summary of methods and samples in interviews with students and staff

Method	Rationale	Sample	Sample selection
Semi-structured interviews with staff, conducted face-to-face	Exploratory exercise as part of my initial investigation to find out from college staff which strategies they considered important in encouraging student retention	26 staff within College A (Principal and Vice-Principal; 4 Directors; 8 Senior Managers; and 12 teaching and support staff in the Business Dept)	Intended to obtain a cross-section of views on the issue of retention
Semi-structured interviews with students, conducted face-to-face	To describe in more detail students' views on the implementation of 9 key retention strategies in College A and College B	26 students in College A; 29 students in College B (Total of 55 students)	Determined by practical issue of available class time
Focus group with students	To triangulate with data collected from student interviews and self-completion questionnaires; and to explore key issues in greater depth	20 students in College A	Determined by practical issue of available class time
Semi-structured interviews with staff, conducted face-to-face and by telephone	To describe staff views on the implementation of 9 key retention strategies in College A and College B	10 staff in College A; and 10 staff in College B (although it was only possible to interview 5 of the College B staff face-to-face)	Non-random. Staff who had worked in the colleges for longest were chosen

Ethnographic methods

Considerations

Drawing on anthropological traditions (Delamont, 2002), 'Ethnographies are based on observational work in particular settings' (Silverman, 2005:49). The key feature of ethnographic research is that it involves some form of participant observation (although this can also sit alongside other methods and approaches). The basic presuppositions of ethnography include:

> *a commitment to studying activities in the 'natural' settings in which they occur; an interest in developing detailed descriptions of the lived experience; a focus on what people actually do, not simply their accounts of their behaviour; and a concern with understanding the relation of particular activities to the constellation of activities that characterize a setting.*
> (Blomberg quoted in ten Have, 2004:108)

Further distinguishing features of ethnographic research are that: it involves a considerable investment of the researcher's time spent with their subjects, for 'There is the assumption that, as the researcher becomes a more familiar presence, participants are less likely to behave uncharacteristically' (Walford, 2001:9); giving high status to the accounts of participants; and embracing the subjectivity inherent in this research approach (Delamont, 2002; Walford, 2001).

As should be clear from this brief outline, ethnographic research can generate rich qualitative data – but the processes of data collection and analysis can be very time intensive. Moreover, participant observation raises a host of ethical issues, such as the gathering and use of data derived from covert observation (Mason, 2002).

Elements of ethnographic research were used in this research, in the sense that one of the institutions studied was the writer's employer. That is, the writer was based in the context where part of the research took place. However, a full ethnographic approach would have required the writer to be more fully immersed with students in both institutions, and this was not the case. For practical reasons this would have been very difficult – for example, teaching commitments meant that the writer did not have large amounts of time available to observe the interactions and 'culture' within the two Business departments under investigation; furthermore, it would be very difficult (if not impossible) for a teacher to unobtrusively observe the 'real lives' of students, simply because they could not be expected to be fully open when their lecturer is around. Finally, it is doubtful whether it would have been possible to observe in sufficient detail all nine of the strategies being investigated here..

I decided instead that I would limit my use of observation techniques to (non-participant) observation of just one of the strategies: teaching and learning. My reason for selecting this strategy for observation was that teaching and learning has been widely cited as being of pivotal importance in student retention (Davies, 1999; McGivney, 1994; Martinez, 2001; Morgan, 2001; NATFHE, 2000; National Audit Office, 2002). I thought that it would be useful, therefore, to go beyond student and staff accounts of teaching and learning gathered through questionnaires and interviews, to actually observe some Business classes in College A and B first hand. I chose to observe a total of 10 lessons (looking at three level 3 and two level 2 lessons in each college).

In order to provide a systematic basis to my observations, and to ensure consistency of approach with each observation, I decided to use the FENTO lesson observation criteria. These criteria consist of 6 Key Areas (assessing learners' needs, planning and preparing teaching, developing and using a range of teaching and learning techniques, managing the learning process, providing learners with support, and assessing the outcomes of learning and learners' achievements) each with between 3 and 9 component elements. Each element is graded as being 'Very Good', 'Good', 'Satisfactory' or 'Unsatisfactory', forming the basis for an overall grade on each Key Area and for the lesson as a whole. Importantly, there is also room for comments to be recorded. While these observation criteria had been designed for the purpose of inspecting and grading teachers, this was not my prime concern – rather, I used the FENTO criteria because they were helpful in directing attention to a wide range of aspects of teaching and learning in a systematic and thorough way.

Action Research

Considerations

Action research is not so much a research method as a strategy for the way in which research is conducted (Denscombe, 2003:74). Defining characteristics of action research are that: it is *practical*, being aimed at real-world problems and issues, often in organisational settings; concerned with *change* as an integral part of the research process; *cyclical*, in terms of feeding back research findings on a regular basis, so that the research can inform and influence changes in practices; and *participative*, in that it seeks the active involvement of people in the process (*ibid*:73-4; Cohen *et al*, 2007:300). Thus:

> *Action research directly addresses the problem of the division between theory and practice. Rather than the research being a linear process of producing knowledge which is later applied to practice settings, action research integrates the development of practice with the construction of research knowledge in a cyclical process.*
>
> (Noffke & Somekh, 2005:89)

The main types of action research are 'technical' (focussed on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of existing situations), 'practical' (seeking to understand a situation in terms of wider social factors) and 'emancipatory' (action research with an explicit aim of challenging inequalities and injustices) (Opie, 2004b:81).

In education, action research projects have been undertaken in areas as varied as teaching methods, learning strategies, continuous assessment, pupils' attitudes and values, the professional development of teachers and improving administration (Cohen *et al*, 2007:297). Action research is attractive because 'It is a flexible, situationally responsive methodology that offers rigour, authenticity and voice' (*ibid*:312). However, it can make intensive demands in terms of fieldwork (Blaxter *et al*, 2001:70) and it may be difficult to generalise findings that are highly situationally specific (Denscombe, 2003:81).

How action research techniques were used in this investigation

Although my research paradigm was not directly based upon action research, several features of this investigation incorporated elements of action research.

Firstly, this thesis is concerned with understanding an important *practical* issue for the two colleges, namely how to improve the implementation of strategies to ensure better student retention. Secondly, the study was concerned with *change* (looking at the implementation of these strategies); and, thirdly, it was also *participative* in that I sought the active engagement and involvement of college staff in the research. Indeed, an important factor in securing permission to carry out this research in the two colleges was the possibility that the emerging research findings might be used to improve practices in College A and B.

Thus, my emerging findings and analysis of the implementation of retention strategies was reported to the Business Faculty Management Team (FMT) within College A (see appendix 3 for a copy of a presentation of research findings made to the FMT in January 2006). As a result of these presentations members of the FMT decided to investigate for themselves how they could improve the implementation of certain strategies (for example, in deciding to look at how communication with students could be improved). Moreover, my interviews with staff in Colleges A and B, as well as informal conversations with them as my research progressed, also had the effect of encouraging members of staff to think more about how elements of their practice, as well as college polices generally, might affect student retention. It was also an opportunity for staff and students to reflect upon the role and influence of college retention strategies. However because the problem under investigation was not solved within the research reported here, this study cannot be classified as a piece of action research in the strict sense.

Sequences in the Research

This section seek to provide an outline of the main stages used in conducting my thesis investigation, which began with a preliminary investigation involving level 4 HND students and staff and subsequently re-focussed on students and staff on level 2 and 3 Business Studies courses in two colleges.

Preliminary Investigation

As part of the taught EdD course the researcher was required to undertake a preliminary investigation. This early work had four aims:

- To investigate the reasons given by students for early withdrawal from a HNC/HND Business course in one college (College A) and find out where they progressed to following this withdrawal;
- To find out what influenced them to choose their courses;
- To identify the groups affected in relation to gender, ethnicity, age and their mode of attendance;
- To explore staff perceptions of the reasons for student drop-out;
- To suggest measures that can be taken to improve retention across the college;
  - And to learn about and test the main research methods that I would subsequently use in the main thesis research.

In light of the above reflections on the various methods of research open to me, I decided to conduct a survey of students who had withdrawn from the HNC/HND course (using self-completion questionnaires), semi-structured interviews with staff and to carry out observations of teaching and learning (see Appendix 4). I designed a postal questionnaire and sent this to 20 students who had left this course early. However, only five of the 20 leavers responded to this questionnaire, so I therefore followed this up with telephone interviews to obtain the views of the other 15 leavers who had not responded to the postal questionnaire (successfully obtaining information from all 15 in this way). In addition, I conducted a focus group interview with the students who had remained on the course so that I could compare the views of leavers and retained students. Next I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten members of staff who were teaching and managing this course. Finally, I carried out observations of the teaching and learning of five classes on this course.

This small-scale early work uncovered a variety of reasons why students had left this particular course early. The two major reasons given by the students were financial pressures (identified as important by 17 out of the 20 leavers) and domestic problems (seen as important by 13 out of the 20 leavers). However, there were also positive reasons given for leaving the course (echoing findings by Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000, and Graham-Mattheson 2002), for example eight out of the 20 indicated that they had progressed to other Higher Education courses. While the members of staff acknowledged the significance of financial pressures on students, they also pointed to language barriers and students not being able to cope with the course as additional factors leading to early withdrawal. The main recommendations from students and staff for improving retention on this course were: more financial support; extra language support; and dedicated study areas within the college for HE students.

The experience of carrying out this preliminary investigation demonstrated to me the difficulties of trying to obtain the views of students once they had dropped out of a course. Although I did manage to track down and get the views of all 20 of the leavers whom I had targeted, both the method of sending out a postal questionnaire (which yielded just five responses out of 20 questionnaires sent out) and the process of conducting follow-up telephone interviews with the other 15 leavers proved very time consuming. For these reasons I decided that my main thesis research would focus on existing students rather than attempt to track down large number of leavers. Aside from the practical difficulties of tracking down students who had left the course, I felt that the preliminary investigation had gone well – and so I decided that I would use questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and observations for the main research.

At this time College A stopped running the HNC/HND course in order to develop a Foundation Degree, which meant I could not continue to investigate retention on this course. As my own role subsequently shifted from teaching mainly level 3 and 4 students to teaching at levels 2 and 3, I decided to re-focus my research on level 2 and 3 Business courses. There were five main stages of data collection within my main investigation, which will now be outlined.

(1) Exploratory work with College A Students and Staff

Moving to the main phase of my thesis research, *now focussed on existing level 2 and 3 students on Business Studies courses*, the initial investigation began with students and staff in College A to explore why students are retained and the strategies employed by the college to promote student retention. In this phase the views of the students and staff were compared.

Firstly, a short survey was administered (see appendix 5) with 68 students from level 2 and level 3 Business courses at College A in January 2005. This survey used mainly open questions and aimed to find out about:

- the students' backgrounds (gender, age, ethnicity, prior qualifications);
- the course they were doing (qualification and level, whether full or part-time);
- reasons and motivations for choosing the course;
- whether they intended to complete the course;
- factors that would encourage students to complete the course and factors that might lead them not to complete the course;
- how students rated the teaching and support in the college;
- students' understandings of college strategies to improve student retention.

In addition to this survey of students, I interviewed 26 staff at different levels of College A. This involved a semi-structured interview with the Principal and Vice-Principal, 4 Directors, 8 Senior Managers and 12 teaching and support staff to ascertain their views on retention problems and to find out how they were implementing retention strategies. From my experience during the pilot stage, it was believed that the use of interviews at the initial stage was useful to set the research context and focus. The aim was to consider the issue from the point of view of the people mentioned earlier as FE employees. Although this seemed time consuming and possibly prone to bias (because the research subjects were with my professional colleagues), attempts were made to restrict the latter difficulty by focusing on what the researcher needed to know. These interviews with staff generated rich data for further investigation in the subsequent stages of the research. The reason for mainly using open questions at this stage was to avoid pre-judging what issues were of importance to the staff.

(2) Survey of Students in College A and B

After reviewing the literature on student retention, which included many examples of student and staff surveys (for example, Beatty-Guenter, 1994; Johnston, 2001; McGivney, 1996a; Martinez, 1995; Martinez & Munday, 1998; Sargant, 2000; Swail, Redd & Penna, 2004; Yorke & Longden, 2004), I was more aware of the types of questions which were being asked of students who had dropped out of their courses and, in one survey, those who had remained on their courses. Many of the research surveys included similar questions on aspects such as:

- Students' reasons for choosing their course;
- Support from the college;

- Quality of teaching and learning;
- Students' motivation;
- Personal finance;
- Reason for non-completion.

These earlier surveys provided me with some ideas for my own questionnaire design, but I was guided primarily by the aims and objectives of my own research (which differed from most of these studies because my aims were not concerned with the causes of student drop-out but with student and staff views on the implementation of retention strategies).

Having identified nine key retention strategies through the literature review and exploratory investigation, it was decided to carry out a survey of students in Colleges A and B to explore their views on the implementation of these nine strategies. This more comprehensive student survey was carried out during late 2004 / early 2005, involving a total of 133 students drawn from both colleges in the study. This questionnaire survey (a copy of which can be seen in Appendix 2) was designed with predominantly closed questions that could later be analysed quantitatively using SPSS. The main focus of this survey was to find out how each of the nine strategies were being implemented and whether the students viewed the implementation of these strategies as being effective. Respondents were also asked a number of open questions about what they thought their college could do to improve student retention.

This survey explored the implementation of each of the nine strategies in detail. A weakness of this questionnaire, from the students' point of view, was that it was too long and detailed and took a long time to complete (it took some students between 45 minutes and an hour to complete).[1] A further difficulty, from the point of view of my research, was that this questionnaire did not allow direct comparisons to be made between each of the nine strategies. This was because a common question format was not adopted throughout the questionnaire and also because students were not directly asked to rate the importance of the nine strategies using common criteria. Hence there was a need for me to redesign the questionnaire with fewer questions and a more consistent approach to question wording and, in particular, to the response categories that were used.

(3) Second Survey of Students in College A and B

In view of the shortcomings of the earlier survey of students described above, particularly the fact that the structure of the questions did not lend themselves to analysis using descriptive statistics (e.g. Chi Square tests to test the significance of observed differences), I carried out a second survey of students in Colleges A and B during late 2005 / early 2006. A copy of this questionnaire can be seen in Appendix 6.

This revised form of the survey had three main aims:

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[1] This was reflected in comments that students made at the end of the questionnaire, where they were asked to comment on the design of the survey. Students made comments such as *'The questionnaire was an interesting exercise, but it took too long to fill in'* and *'OK, but would be better if shorter'*.

1) to reduce the overall number of questions and utilise a common question format that would facilitate easier comparisons between each of the nine strategies (in terms of the effectiveness of their implementation);
2) to ask students directly about the relative importance of each of the nine strategies in their decision to stay and complete their course;
3) to allow for a second level of data analysis using Beatty-Guenter's five categories of retention strategy (sorting, supporting, connecting, transforming the institution and transforming the student).

To meet the first of these aims, the second student survey was designed to be much more structured than the first survey had been. This involved reducing the overall number of questions, selecting a common number of items to represent each strategy and then asking about each item using a common question structure and common response options. Building on the questions that I had used in the first survey I identified for each retention strategy five items that could together represent the strategy, so that the core of the questionnaire was made up of a total of 45 items (9 x 5 items). The choice of items was based upon a distillation of the questions I had used in the previous survey, in which I kept or adapted the questions which appeared to have worked well whilst trying to capture the key elements of each strategy. The list of the 45 items, grouped according to strategy (which is also how they were presented in the questionnaire) is shown in Appendix 7. Each section of five items relating to a particular strategy began with the instruction 'Please rate each of the following elements of the [name of strategy]' and respondents were then asked to rate each item as being either 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Satisfactory', 'Poor' or 'Very Poor', with a 'Don't Know' option also being available.[2]

A major advantage of this more structured approach was that it allowed the responses to each item to be translated into a mean average score of between 1 and 5 (with 1 being 'Excellent' and 5 being 'Very Poor'). The mean of these individual mean scores could then be calculated for each set of five items corresponding to each strategy, which could then provide a composite score indicating how highly students rated the implementation of each of the nine strategies. In this way the different retention strategies could be directly compared, whether this was in terms of comparisons between the different strategies themselves, between the respondents in the two colleges, or both of these dimensions.

As well as asking students for their views about how effectively particular strategies were being implemented within the colleges it was also meant to find out which retention strategies were most important to them. This was addressed in the second part of the questionnaire, by asking respondents directly how important they considered each of the strategies were in their own decision to stay and complete their course. The wording and response options to each of these questions followed a common format to allow for ease of comparison, for example: '*How important is effective teaching and learning in your decision to stay and complete your course?*' (Response options: 'Very important'; 'Quite important'; 'Not very important'; 'Not important at all'; and 'Don't know'.

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[2] This shorter and more structured approach to the design of the questionnaire received positive feedback from students, who made comments such as *'Easy to fill in'* and *'Straightforward'*. It took students less time to complete than the previous survey.

It was designed in this format to allow the analysis of the students' responses both in terms of the nine retention strategies that had been identified as being important and also in terms of Beatty-Guenter's five categories of retention strategy. Comparing the nine strategies identified with Beatty-Guenter's categories of **'sorting', 'supporting', 'connecting', 'transforming** the institution' and 'transforming the student' it was clear that there was not a neat match between the two, and therefore the nine strategies I had identified could not simply be transferred on to the Beatty-Guenter categories. For example, induction as a strategy involves elements of sorting ('Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course'), transforming the institution ('Having the content and requirements of your course clearly explained'), connecting ('Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff') and **supporting** ('Being given information about learning resources in the college').

This meant that in analysing the data, the 45 items in the questionnaire would have to be ungrouped from the nine strategies and individually reassigned to the Beatty-Guenter categories. Although this re-ordering of the 45 items did not result in an even allocation between the five categories of retention strategy (see Appendix 8), it did offer an alternative way of looking at the data that draw upon an important theoretical perspective on student retention. Just as with the nine retention strategies, it was then possible to combine the means from the items under each heading to arrive at an overall mean score for each type of retention strategy.

(4) Interviews with Students and Staff

Having collected a large amount of quantitative data from the students, there was a need for me to supplement this with some more detailed qualitative data to further explore students' and staff views. The next step followed was to conduct individual interviews with 26 students in College A and 29 students in College B. One focus group discussion was also held with 20 students from College A. The aim of these interviews was to explore in more detail students' views on which college retention strategies were most important to them, to compliment the quantitative surveys of students in the two colleges. These qualitative interviews did not ask directly about the nine retention strategies explored in the quantitative surveys, but instead asked a series of more open questions based upon Beatty-Guenter's (1994) categories of retention strategy (sorting, supporting, connecting, transforming the institution and transforming the student). The interview schedule also asked students whether they had ever thought that they would not complete their course, what the reasons were for this and what it was that encouraged them to stay and finish the course.

The staff interviews were carried out with a total of 20 staff, 10 from College A and 10 from College B. The aim of these interviews with staff was to gain additional information to that which had been collected during my initial investigation. All ten of the College A staff were interviewed face-to-face.

Their responses were recorded manually by me based on set questions and this was checked and signed by the respondents to confirm what they have said and what I recorded. Among the College B staff, five were interviewed by telephone based on set questions which I recorded and read their responses to them after recording which they agreed with me; and five completed the survey as a self-completion questionnaire. Overall the staff surveyed in the two colleges were largely similar in terms of gender, age, ethnic background, marital status, whether or not they had children and the levels of course they were teaching/managing.

(5) Observations of Teaching and Learning

I decided to observe teaching and learning in the two colleges because the retention literature and my initial survey had indicated that students were highly motivated by teaching and learning. I wanted to investigate what it was about the teaching and learning that students found motivating and to see this in the natural classroom setting rather than rely solely upon comments given in interviews or through the questionnaires. I also felt that it was important to include some observation of teaching and learning to strengthen the qualitative evidence within my study.

A total of 10 classes were observed, five in each college. In carrying out these observations; the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) checklist was used. This observation schedule (shown in appendix 9) was chosen because it covers key areas that are relevant in assessing teaching and learning. Furthermore, the FENTO criteria link with several of the nine key strategies under investigation (e.g. it covers learner support, the environment and communication); and this checklist was also used by the University of Greenwich in its initial teacher education programme.

Data Analysis

The research approach, methods and sequencing adopted during the investigation provided a large volume of both qualitative and quantitative data. As stages of fieldwork were completed generating raw data I was then faced with questions about how it should be analysed. Blaxter *et al* (2001:205) nicely captured my feelings about this next step: 'Analysis can be a fearful word for the small-scale researcher.... how do you get from the vast array of words and numbers that you have collected or produced to a seemingly neat set of conclusions or recommendations? What is this process called analysis?' (ibid). This was a new experience and challenge for me, but with the support of my supervisors, the research methods teaching on the EdD programme and some helpful textbooks I began to get to grips with the task of analysis.

For the **quantitative analysis** of the surveys of students questionnaire data was entered into SPSS. This enabled me to carry out statistical analyses of the quantitative data using descriptive statistics (such as simple frequencies and averages), simple interrelationships (cross-tabulations) and inferential statistics (using Chi Square tests to test the significance of observed differences in cross-tabulations). In looking at this data it did not seduce the researcher by the apparent 'certainty' and 'neatness' of the numbers although, to realised the need to interpret the figures presented – unfortunately SPSS would not do the work of analysis for me! In some ways the task was made easier by the fact that my investigation is concerned with the implementation of nine retention strategies, because this meant that I was essentially performing similar analyses nine times over (which, rather than becoming tedious, helped me to develop my confidence in using the SPSS software).

In order to analyse my questionnaire data effectively I first had to 'simplify' some of it by re-coding certain variables, with the aim of being able to analyse data in the form of 2 x 2 and 2 x 3 contingency tables (see Appendix 10). This was necessary for making the data easier to analyse and interpret, but was also dictated by my sample sizes (because for inferential statistics cells must not contain very low values, that is <5). On the survey with the second cohort of young people for example, the response categories for the 45 items were re-coded from five responses ('Excellent', 'Good', 'Satisfactory', 'Poor', 'Very poor') into two ('Excellent or Good' and 'Satisfactory', Poor or 'Very poor'). I grouped the middle rating ('Satisfactory') with 'Poor and Very Poor' rather than with 'Excellent and Good' because on the whole the ratings from students tended towards the more positive end of the spectrum – in order to identify meaningful differences this meant that I focussed on the percentages of students giving each strategy ratings of 'Excellent or Good'. This re-coding meant I was then able to analyse and report findings such as *56% of level 3 students rated the information they were given about college support services as being 'Excellent' or 'Good', compared to just 35% of level 2 students.*

As indicated earlier in this chapter, it was only through analysing my data that I picked up on some of the shortcomings in my earlier attempts at questionnaire design. Specifically, I came to appreciate that direct comparison of data is made difficult (if not impossible) if the data are not collected in exactly the same way, using the same format and identical response categories. My early mistakes were frustrating, but in some ways they were simply a reflection of successive phases in the development of my analysis, which moved from the initial identification of retention strategies to an attempt to more systematically comparing them (figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Stages of analysis and development of survey questions

IDENTIFICATION of retention strategies	**EXPLORATION** of the features of these strategies	**COMPARISON** of retention strategies
(Open survey questions)	*(Closed questions, but not systematic)*	*(Systematic structuring of closed questions)*

I also had to make important decisions regarding the analysis of the **qualitative data** I had gathered (in the form of my notes from interviews with students and staff, the focus group discussion in College A, responses to the questionnaire questions, and completed observation sheets from observing teaching and learning in the two colleges). I considered using a qualitative data analysis software package such as NUD*IST or N-VIVO to assist with this, but after speaking to researchers who were more familiar with these programmes I concluded that this would not be necessary. Quite simply I did not have a sufficiently large volume of qualitative data (for example, large numbers of lengthy interview transcripts) to make this worthwhile. This meant that I had to analyse these data 'manually'. In fact I typed up my detailed notes and then began to categorise and order them in Word.

Despite the assumed differences between qualitative and quantitative data analysis, I actually found that my analysis of qualitative responses involved some similarities with the quantitative analysis. Thus, I began with a large number of responses to each question and sought to render these meaningful by grouping them into common categories. In order to then have some measure of the significance of these responses I then *counted* the numbers of responses within each category (a decidedly quantitative approach to analysing my qualitative data). These processes enabled me to report findings such as: *Six respondents said that the induction could be improved by introducing students to a wider range of staff, with 5 specifically mentioning the Principal: "The Principal should come and introduce themselves to the students. It is a shame to study in a college without knowing my Principal or my Vice Principal".*

Finally, an important consideration for me was that I wanted to try, as far as I was able, to bring together the quantitative and qualitative data I had collected within a single analysis. Thus it will be seen in the next chapter that I have ordered the presentation of my findings according to the categories that had most meaning for answering my research question (that is, in relation to each of the nine strategies for improving student retention) rather than according to method of data collection. This was partly for the sake of clarity and to avoid repetition, but it was also because I felt that both types of data were equally valid – I was given confidence in this by the high degree of consistency in the messages that come through the data, both qualitative and quantitative.

To return to the quote from Hitchcock and Hughes with which I began this chapter, the process of identifying the research methods and an approach for this investigation involved me in a journey of *'critical, reflexive, and professionally orientated activity'* which did indeed generate '*self-knowledge and personal development in such a way that practice can be improved*'. As a teacher in FE the experience of researching student retention has made me far more conscious of the potential impact of various strategies within my department and throughout the college as a whole on student retention. For example, if I encounter an instance of poor communication or something that is wrong with the college environment, I no longer see this as simply a communication or an environmental issue, but find myself asking 'what are the implications of this for student retention and achievement?'. The experience of conducting this investigation has also given me insights into the ways in which research knowledge is generated and it has deepened my understanding of the methods of educational research.

Chapter 4

Findings from Student Surveys and Interviews

Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings from three stages of data collection with students in Colleges A and B. The first stage involved a mainly quantitative survey of 133 students in the two colleges, which was designed to find out about students' *experiences* of each of the 9 strategies identified as being important for improving retention. A second quantitative survey was later carried out with a further 218 students, which sought to record in a more systematic way students' *evaluations* of the implementation of each of the 9 strategies. These two quantitative surveys will be referred to here as the surveys with the first and second cohorts of students. Thirdly, I carried out individual interviews with students and one focus group interview in College B with a sub-set of 55 of the students surveyed in the second cohort. These qualitative interviews sought additional information from students about what they considered to be important about particular retention strategies.

This chapter is divided into three main parts. The first part examines what students said about the general importance of different strategies for improving retention, as distinct from their experiences of the actual implementation of those strategies. The second part presents students' evaluations of the implementation of each of the 9 retention strategies, synthesising findings from the quantitative surveys and the qualitative interview data. The final part then considers the main differences in the responses made by different groups of students, looking at statistically significant differences that were found according to which college students were from, the level of their course, their age, gender, ethnic background and whether or not they received EMA.

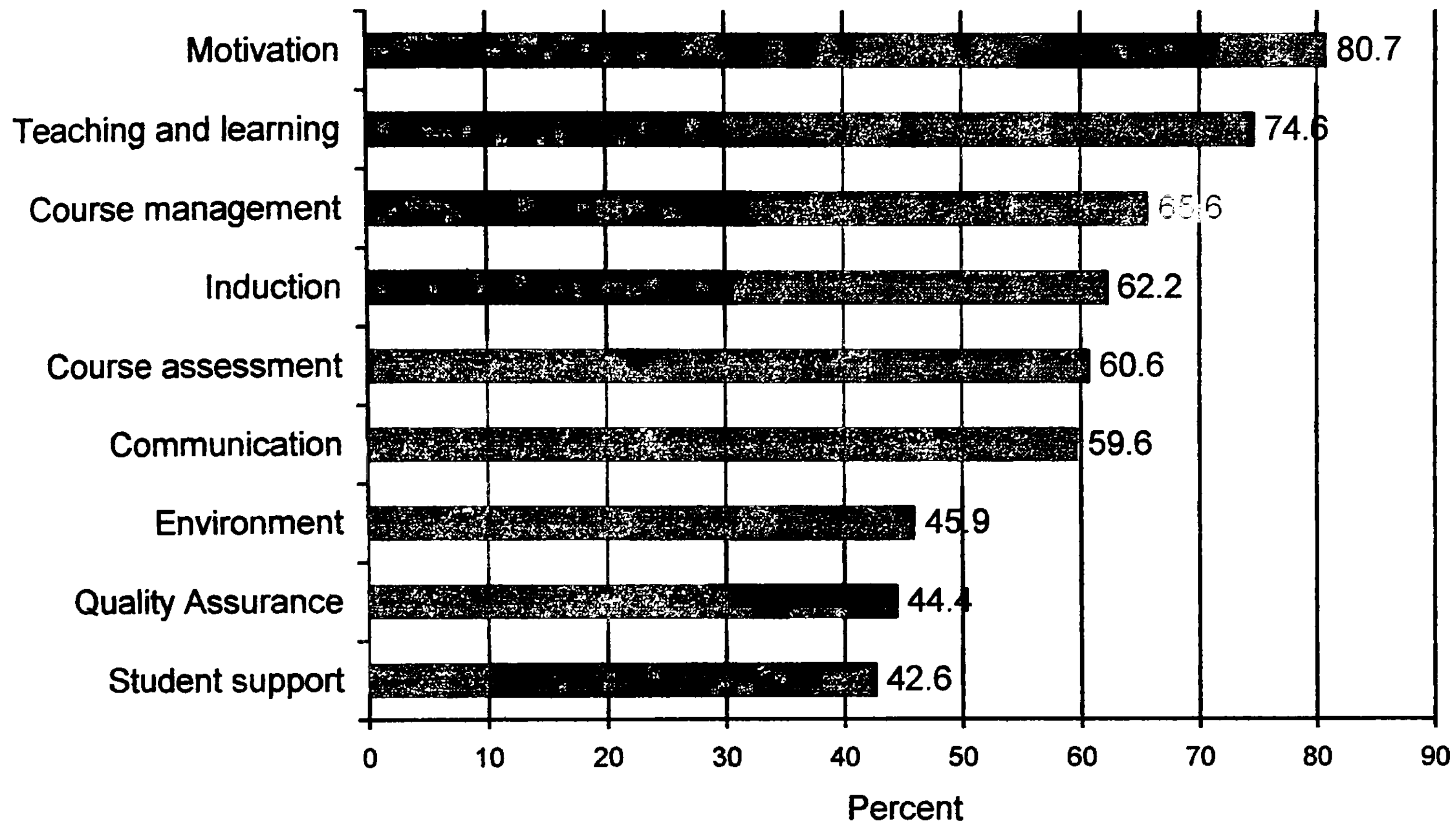
(1) Students' Views on the Importance of Different Strategies

This part looks at the results from survey questions that sought to ascertain which retention strategies students thought were most important in helping them to stay and complete their course. The rationale for asking these questions was to find out from students which strategies they thought matter most in ensuring their retention, as distinct from questions about how effectively they thought each strategy was actually being implemented.

Ratings of the importance of different strategies

Students in the second cohort surveyed were asked how important each of nine different retention strategies is in their decision to stay and complete their course. The responses to this set of questions highlighted marked differences in terms of the strategies that students identified as being 'very important' to them. At the top end, 81% of the respondents (n=171) said that their own motivation was 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course, and 75% said the same of the teaching and learning (n=159); however, fewer than half of the respondents identified the college environment, quality assurance processes and college support services as being 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course (figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 - Percentage of students describing each retention strategy as 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course (n=218)



These data strongly suggest that the strategies seen by students as being more important than others were those with the greatest immediacy for them: their own individual motivation, teaching and learning, and course management. The less important strategies appeared to be those that were apparently more remote from their day-to-day classroom experiences: college support services, quality assurance process and the college environment.

It should be noted however that only a small minority of respondents described *any* of the strategies as being 'not very important' or 'not important at all'. Just 3% of the respondents (n=7) said that their own motivation was 'not very important' or 'not important at all' in their decision to stay and complete their course, but only 14% said this of college support services (n=29). So, for the majority of the students surveyed, all of the retention strategies were seen as having some degree of importance. But, within this, students' own motivation, and teaching and learning stand out as being the more important retention strategies as far as the students were concerned.

These figures suggest that the students surveyed recognised that there are a wide range of possible causes of drop-out – hence all of the nine types of strategy were seen as broadly important for improving retention. The identification of motivation and teaching and learning as being the more important of the nine strategies is open to different, but not necessarily incompatible, interpretations. On the one hand, this could be interpreted as students emphasising that being motivated by a stimulating course and effective teaching is at the core of their reasons for choosing to stay and complete the course. On the other hand, the stress placed upon the strategies closest to the students' day-to-day learning experiences could simply be a reflection of students emphasising that with which they were most familiar. In other words, students may see areas such as support services, quality assurance processes and the college environment as being less important because they have less awareness of how these factors might be helping or hindering their learning experiences.

Differences in the importance attached to individual retention strategies

The data shown in figure 4.1 were subjected to a Chi Square analysis, where the variables of college, level of course, age, gender, ethnicity and whether or not students received EMA were each considered. Only the analyses involving gender (table 4.2) and level of course (table 4.3) provided statistically significant differences.

Gender

The data in table 4.2 show that female respondents were more likely than male respondents to say that effective induction, course management, teaching and learning and college support were 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course.

Table 4.2 – Differences in the importance attached to different retention strategies according to gender (n=218)

Strategy	% Females saying 'Very Important'	% Males saying 'Very Important'	x^2	p
Induction	70.2	56.0	4.172	.041
Course Management	80.2	54.2	14.815	.000
Teaching and Learning	83.7	69.5	5.444	.020
College Support	50.6	35.7	4.336	.037

The finding that female students attached significantly greater importance than males to these four types of strategies could be indication that they are more satisfied with the way in which each strategy is being implemented. Support for such an interpretation can be found in a recent LSC survey of learner satisfaction in FE (LSC, 2005b). This survey of 31,000 learners on FE courses during 2003/4 found that female learners were more satisfied with their overall learning experiences. Specifically, females were more likely than males to give positive ratings of the quality of teaching and of course management (in terms of communicating changes in times for sessions).

Course level

Students on level 3 courses were more likely than those on level 2 courses to say that having an effective induction and effective course management was 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course. These differences are shown in table 4.3.

Table 4.3 – Differences in the importance attached to different retention strategies according to the level of course that students were on (n=218)

Strategy	% level 3 students saying 'Very Important'	% level 2 students saying 'Very Important'	x^2	p
Induction	67.4	52.7	4.396	.036
Course Management	71.1	55.3	5.062	.024

As with the gender, these differences could be related to differences in levels of satisfaction. Thus, the LSC Learner Satisfaction Survey found that older students were more satisfied with their overall learning experience and that younger learners (aged 16-18) were less satisfied with aspects of course management (LSC, 2005b:6 & 114).

In summary, students perceived all nine of the strategies under investigation as being important for improving retention. The strategies seen as being of greatest importance (described by more than 7 out of 10 respondents as being 'very important') were motivation and teaching and learning, whereas fewer than half said that support services, quality assurance and the college environment were ‘very important’. There were relatively few statistically significant differences found between different groups of students in relation to the importance they attached to different strategies. However, females were found to be more likely than males to see induction, course management, teaching and learning, and college support as being 'very important'; while students on level 3 courses were more likely than those on level 2 courses to describe 'induction' and 'course management' as being very important'. These differences may in part be a reflection of generally higher levels of satisfaction with learning in FE among females and older learners.

(2) Students' Views on the Implementation of Different strategies

This section looks at students’ experiences of the actual implementation of the nine key strategies identified for improving retention. Students from the two colleges were asked a series of questions about how effectively they thought each strategy was being implemented. The results from the two self-completion surveys, individual interviews and focus group discussion are integrated to bring together the quantitative and qualitative data that was collected.

Strategy 1: Recruitment and Induction

'Sorting': Making sure students are on the right course

Most of the students in each college who participated in the interviews were able to identify things that their college had done to help ensure they were on the right course, particularly at the time of admission or during their induction.

Students from both colleges tended to identify the information which they had been given by their college as the main practical way in which they had been helped to make the right choice of course. Typical comments from students were:

> *"The college gave me their brochure and directed me to their web site for more information about the course"* (A17)
>
> *"They explained what the course is about and how it runs"* (B12)

A minority of students interviewed in each college were critical of the college admissions process. One student said *"Nothing was done to make sure that this is the right course for me. No interview or diagnostic test. I started the course and got on with it"* (A15); and another commented *"I had no advice from the college on the course at all"* (A25). Overall there were very few strongly positive comments about this aspect of college policy, and a number of mixed and negative views, suggesting that this may be an area in which both colleges could improve.

Students' experiences of induction

The vast majority of the first cohort of students surveyed (94%, n=125) said that they had received an induction, with just two respondents reporting that they had not had an induction (and Don't Know / Not stated = 4.6%, n= 6). During induction, the majority of respondents had met personal tutors (84%, n=111), teachers/lecturers (71%, n=94), course managers (63%, n=84) and course co-ordinators (50%, n=67). Just 23% reported having met their college Principal (n=31) and only 17% had met the Deputy Vice Principal (n=23). More students in College B reported having met the College Principal during induction than College A students and this difference was found to be statistically significant.[3] One of the College A students said to me *"I don't know what the Principal looks like. If I saw him in the street I would walk past without saying hello"*; and another said *"Is he white or black? Can we see his picture Miss?"*. This is a good example of students not being well 'connected' to the institution (cf. Beatty-Guenter, 1994), or of weak integration into the college (Tinto, 1975), which may put students at greater risk of dropping out.

Overall ninety percent or more of respondents reported that as part of their induction they were given their timetable (92%, n=122), received an ID card (90%, n=120) and were told about college rules and regulations (90%, n=120). Eighty percent of respondents (80%, n=106) said that the induction had given them the opportunity to understand course content/delivery – but 8% said that that the induction had not done this (n=10) and a further 10% said that they did not know whether the induction had done this (n=13). Being helped to make the right choice of course was a feature of the induction for three quarters of the respondents (76%, n=101), with 17% indicating that they had been helped to transfer courses during induction (n=23).

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[3] In answer to the question 'During the induction did you meet the college Principal?', a greater proportion of College B students (26 out of 45) answered 'yes' than College A students (5 out of 46). A Chi Square analysis of these data indicated a statistically significant difference between the College B and College A students [$x^2 = 16.138$; df = 1; $p = .000$], with College B students more likely to say that they had met their college Principal during induction.

Sixty eight percent of respondents said that their induction had given them the opportunity to visit the college library (n=91), 66% that it had made them aware of support services in the college (n=88), 62% said that they had seen the college's computing facilities (n=82) and 46% said that they had seen the college's administration offices (n=61). Completing a diagnostic test was a feature of induction for 53% of respondents overall (n=71), with respondents from College A being more likely to have had a diagnostic test (94%, n=50) than respondents from College B (62%, n=21). This difference was statistically significant.[4]

It is interesting that while the vast majority of students experienced some form of induction, exactly which college staff they met during this process appears to have varied greatly. While most had met with personal tutors and teachers/lecturers during induction, fewer than one in four had had contact with senior college managers (Principal or Deputy Vice Principal) – a difference that was particularly pronounced in College A. Variations in what students reported they did during induction may also be significant: while 90% or more were given routine information (such as receiving their timetable and ID card), around one in three said that they had not been made aware of college support services, and nearly half said that they did not complete a diagnostic test. These figures on induction could help to explain why students attributed less importance to student support and other retention strategies operating at the college-level such as Quality Assurance and the college environment (as shown in figure 4.1 above).

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[4] In answer to the question 'Did the induction provide you with the opportunity to do a diagnostic test?', a greater proportion of College B students (50 out of 53) answered 'yes' than College A students (21 out of 34). A Chi Square analysis of these data indicated a statistically significant difference between the College B and College A students [$x^2 = 14.644$; df = 1; $p = .000$], with College B students more likely to say that they had done a diagnostic test as part of their induction.

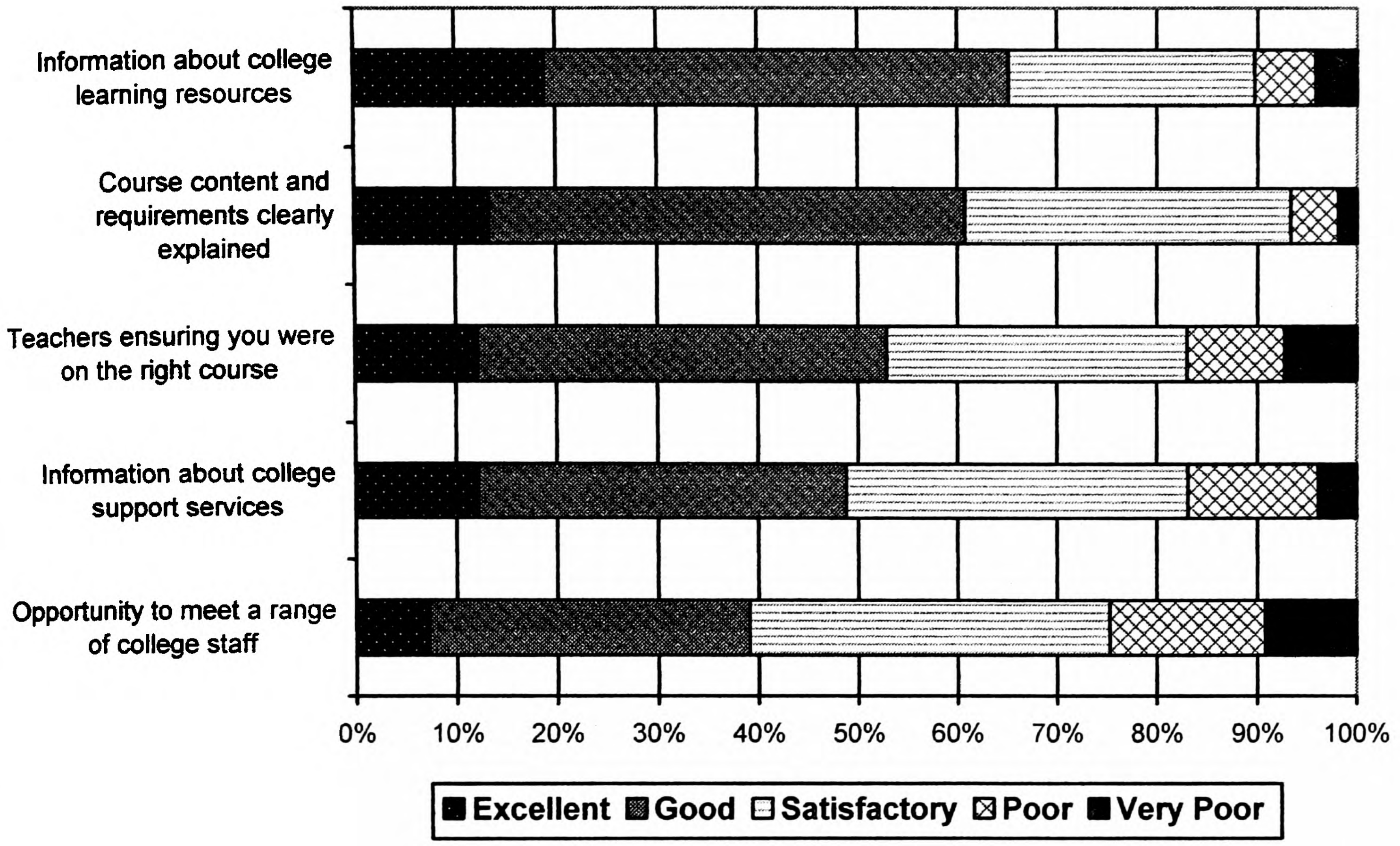
Positive comments from students in College A about induction included: *"Coming for the one-week induction has helped me to know the details of my course and I now know what to do"*; *"I now know what to do on the course"*; and another said *"I used this induction to do a diagnostic test, and now I am referred to additional support in English and I believe I will do better with English support"*. In College B one student commented *"I believe the college can do more on induction by not making it boring, I want them to teach me straight away"*. Another student from College B said *"The tour of the college was only for one hour. I feel that we could tour more areas of the college to have a better feel of the environment"*.

How induction was rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate their experiences of induction as 'Excellent', 'Good', 'Satisfactory', 'Poor' or 'Very poor' according to five criteria (figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4 shows that the most highly rated item on induction was 'Being given information about learning resources in the college' ('excellent' or 'good' = 65%; 'poor' or 'very poor' = 10%). The lowest rated item was 'Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff' ('excellent' or 'good' = 39%; 'poor' or 'very poor' = 25%), which reinforces the point that many students do not seem to have had contact with senior college managers during their induction.

Figure 4.4 - Students' ratings of items linked to induction (n=218)



Suggestions for improving induction

Thirty six respondents among the first cohort surveyed offered suggestions for how induction could be improved. The most common set of suggestions, made by 9 respondents, concerned ways in which the induction process could be made more efficient and better organised. For example:

> *"Try to make sure all ID cards are given on induction and also timetables"*

A suggestion made by 7 respondents was that the induction should provide more opportunities for students to meet and get to know one another:

> *"You can make the students get in a group so they can meet and speak to each other"*

> *"Give the students a chance to meet friends"*

Six respondents from College A said that the induction could be improved by introducing students to a wider range of staff, with 5 specifically mentioning the Principal:

> *"The Principal should come and introduce themselves to the students. It is a shame to study in a college without knowing my Principal or my Vice Principal"*

Four respondents said that they would have liked a tour, or to have had a better tour, of the college.

In summary, the questionnaire and interview data on recruitment and induction indicate that students were relatively satisfied with their experiences of these processes. Indeed, of the nine strategies being investigated, recruitment and induction ranked third in terms of the ratings given by students for the effectiveness of implementation (figure 4.13 at the end of this section). However, it is clear that there is a room for improvement. In both colleges students' views on their experience of recruitment and admissions processes were mixed, with some claiming that they received no advice or guidance to help ensure that they were placed on the right course. Induction appears to have been effective for imparting to students the most practical information they required at the start of their courses, but it appears that opportunities to introduce students to college support services and senior college managers were being missed. Worryingly only 62% of students in College B (n=21) received a diagnostic test during their induction, compared to 94% of their counterparts in College A (n=50). It is possible that failure to address these areas during induction may create problems for students later on in their studies.

Strategy 2: Course Management

'Connecting': How well connected students feel to course teachers and the college

In both colleges, the majority of students interviewed reported that they felt well connected to their course teachers: 37 out of the 46 students interviewed in College A were wholly positive in their comments; and 22 out of the 29 College B students interviewed also stated unequivocally that they felt well connected. The following comments were typical:

> *"college staff are friendly and approachable and this is encouraging because if I have a problem I can easily approach them for a solution"* (A19)

> *"I do feel well connected to my tutors - they are comfortable to talk to and easy to get along with"* (B17)

Although some students indicated that they felt more connected to some teachers than others, the more important distinction appears to be between the course teachers and the wider college (particularly as represented by senior college managers). Individual students commented:

> *"The teachers are very welcoming and caring. The campus office staff are very helpful. But the top managers are not. We hardly know the Principal. The course manager is very rude"* (A14)

> *"Teachers are very friendly and I do know all my teachers. However the managers seem to dominate and are not close to students"* (B10)

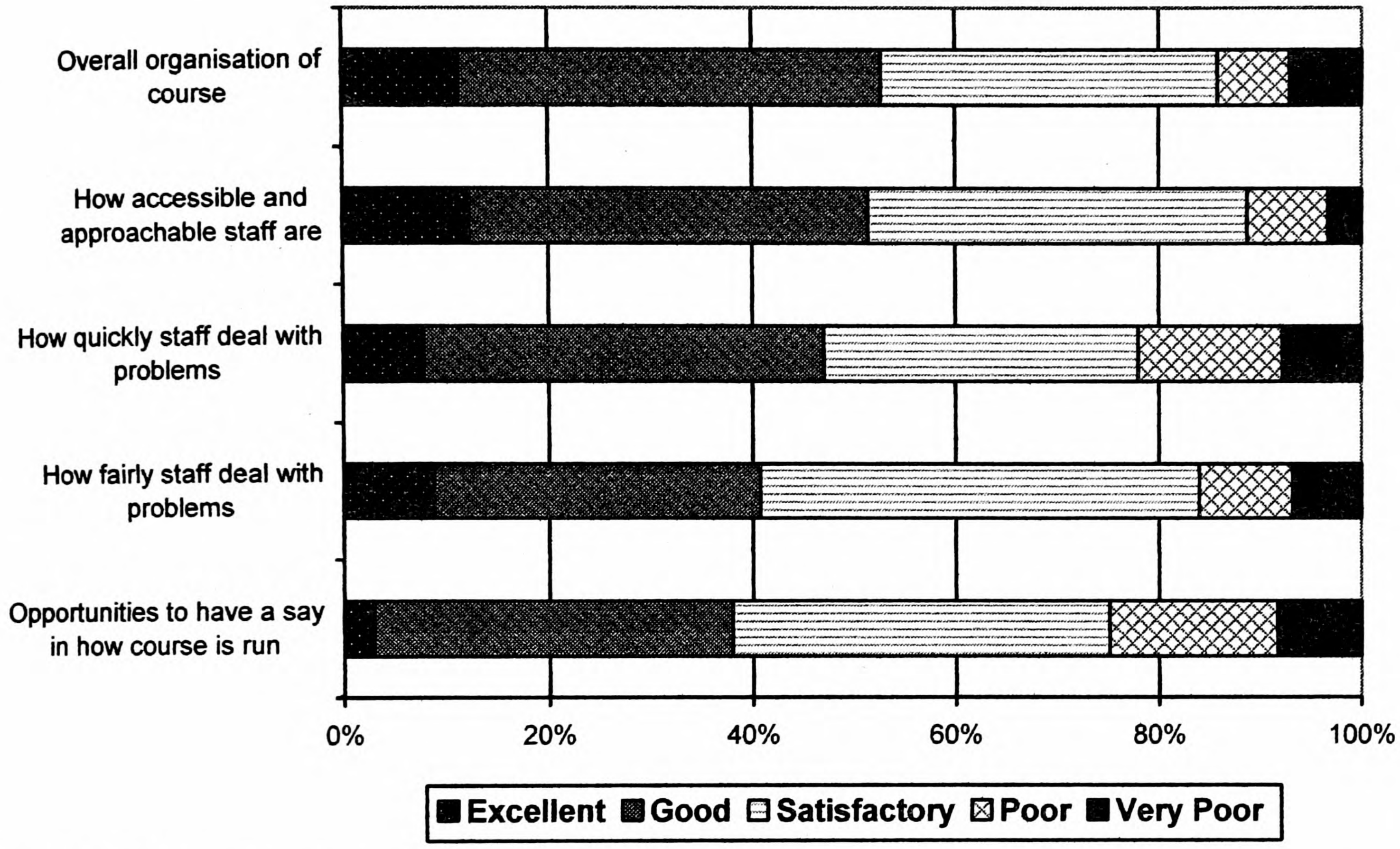
Thus, while most students expressed feeling very well connected with the teachers on their course, in both of the colleges (and in College A in particular) students said that they felt much less connected to college managers.

How course management was rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate their experiences of the course management (figure 4.5).

Among the overall responses to the 5 items on course management, the most highly rated item was 'Overall organisation of your course' ('excellent' or 'good' = 53%; 'poor' or 'very poor' = 14%). The lowest rated item was 'Opportunities to have a say in decisions about how your course is run' ('excellent' or 'good' = 38%; 'poor' or 'very poor' = 25%). Responses to the item 'How fairly staff deal with problems' were similar to national responses made to a comparable question in the LSC's Learner Satisfaction Survey: nationally, 38% of FE learners who made a complaint reported that they were satisfied with the outcome, and 20% said that the outcome did not satisfy them (LSC, 2005b:14); in my survey, 41% of students rated the fairness with which problems are dealt as 'excellent' or 'good', and 16% rated this as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

Figure 4.5 - Students' ratings of items linked to course management (n=218)



Suggestions for improving course management

The students who completed the first questionnaire made a total of 48 suggestions of actions that college managers could take to improve student retention. A quarter of the comments (12) focussed directly on course management issues, with a particular emphasis placed upon consistency of teaching staff and timetables:

> *"Have one teacher teaching and not changing all the time"*
>
> *"Be more organised as far as classrooms are concerned"*

This issue was also picked up in the most recent inspection of College A, with the inspection report commenting that 'Timetable and staff changes are frequent'.

However, students comments on what managers could do to improve student retention went far beyond course management issues of teachers, classrooms and timetabling. The most frequent set of suggestions (18 comments) concerned aspects of teaching and learning. There were also comments relating to: course assessment (7 comments); college support (4 comments); and communication (3 comments).

These data highlight the many different aspects of course management, which students related to and evaluated differently. Crucially, students appeared to feel much more strongly connected with their course teachers than with college managers and the college as a whole. While this is perhaps unsurprising, given that students are likely to spend more time with their teachers than with other college staff, it may also represent a problem when it comes to engaging students in college-wide strategies to enhance their retention. Another finding which was perhaps to have been expected was that students were particularly concerned with the practical issue of having consistency of timetables and teaching staff. Data from the LSC Learner Satisfaction Survey (2005b:26) indicate that these concerns are more widely shared by students in FE, with only around two-thirds giving the highest ratings to 'Teachers/tutors turning up as planned' (63%) and 'Seeing the same teachers/tutors throughout' (65%). Overall, students' evaluations of course management ranked it fifth out of the nine strategies (see figure 4.1below).

Strategy 3: Motivation

'Transforming the student': How effectively course teachers motivate students

In the individual interviews and focus group students in both colleges praised the ability of their teachers to motivate them and cited a variety of different ways in which did this. These included effective teaching, individual support and encouragement, monitoring attendance and attainment and conveying to students the benefits of successful completion and progression.

The students in College A were very positive about the ability of the teachers to motivate them to do well on their course. All of those who answered the question 'How good are your course teachers at motivating you to do well on the course?' had something positive to say, although four of the students interviewed said that not all of the teachers were equally good at motivating them: *"75% of my teachers are very good at motivating"* (A3); *"Some of them are really good in motivating, but some are not really good motivators"* (A6). The main ways in which teachers could motivate students to do well in their course that were mentioned were:

Encouragement and support - *"They're extremely encouraging and are positive about me and other pupils doing well"* (A10); *"Teachers are excellent and devoted to our success"* (A14); *"More helpful and loving"* (A21).

Good teaching / making the course interesting – *"They are quite good. Give us task to work as a team etc"* (A1); *"Good lecturers with handouts to support our learning, one to one support and opportunity for individual learning"* (A5); *"The teachers motivate you very well by making the lesson interesting"* (A8).

By linking success to progression opportunities – *"Teachers are very motivating, particularly when you are encouraged by the teachers that this course is a progression route to BTEC National"* (A19).

And by supporting students in relation to course assessment – *"They give me the fullest support on my coursework"* (A2); *"They are doing one to one in order to help us with our assignments"* (A7); *"Excellent teachers who are very supportive in my work. They encourage your learning through checking your work and working with you"* (A20); *"Teachers are alright, teaching and extra help with course work"* (A15).

The students from College B were similarly very positive about the ability of their teachers to motivate them to do well in their course, with 24 out of 29 giving positive views on the motivational abilities of their teachers. These students cited a variety of different ways in which they could be motivated by teachers, which included:

Feedback and support with coursework - *"Giving us extra time and telling us how it could be easier"* (B8); *"Our teachers give continuous help and feedback* *in order to motivate us by making corrections and telling us what is required"* (B21).

Making learning interesting and enjoyable - "*They motivate us as the teachers make the lessons very interesting"* (B20); *"Very good. Teachers are very supportive, making sure that lesson is interesting"* (B10).

By monitoring students' attainment and attendance - *"Very good because they make sure that you attend your class and that your attendance is high"* (B11); *"Very good cause every time I am going down with my results, attendance they give me advice and do everything to get back where I was"* (B15).

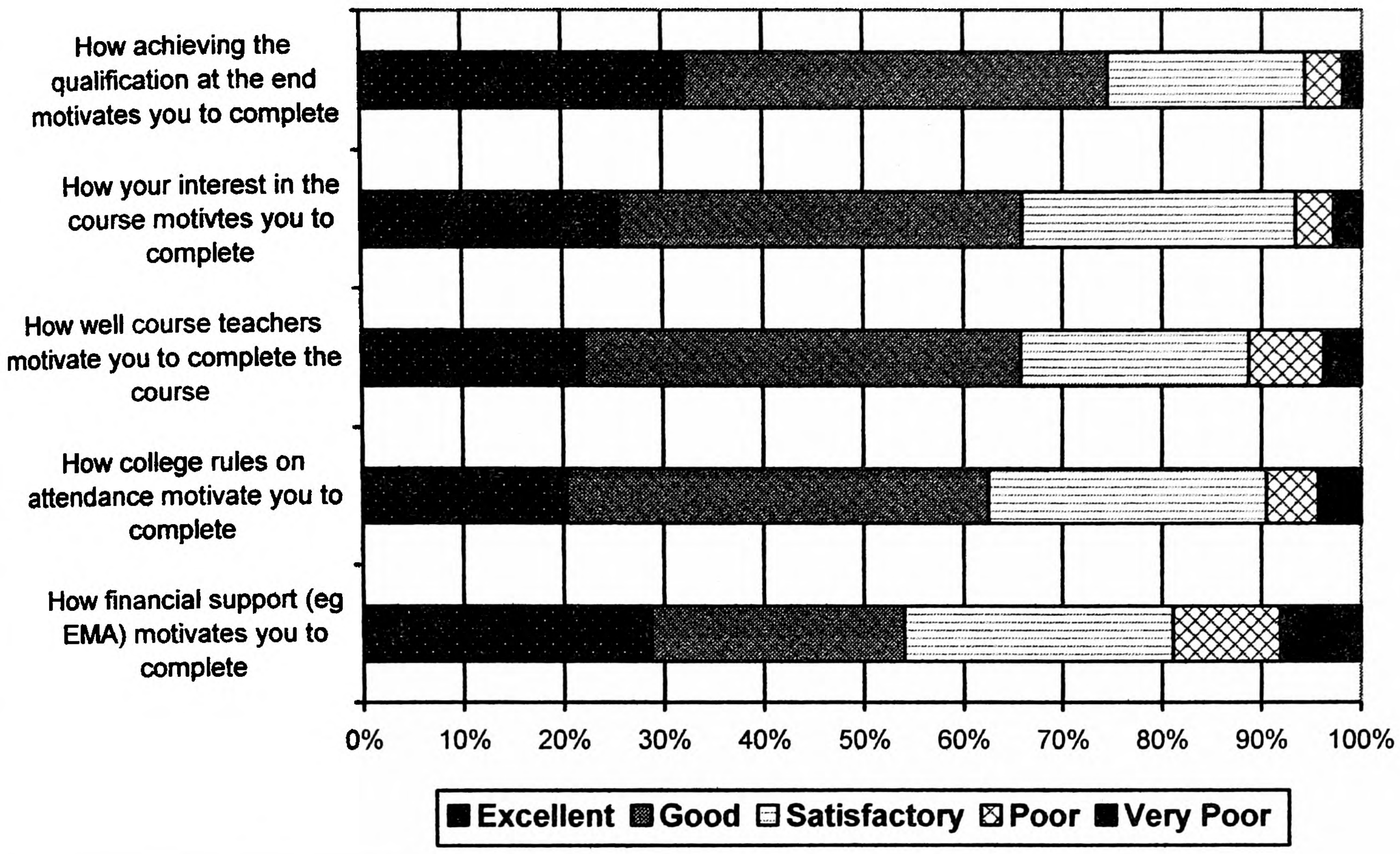
And by warning students of the consequences if they do not do well - *"Very good as they tell us of the consequence if we are to fail"* (B29).

Two students said that only some of their teachers were effective at motivating them, e.g. *"Some are well motivating but some are not"* (B25), while another said *"It depends on some teachers, a few of them want us to achieve, they support, and most teachers just don't care"* (B17).

How motivation was rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate motivation according to five criteria (figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6 - Students' ratings of items linked to their own motivation (n=218)



Among the overall responses to the 5 items on factors linked to motivation, the most highly rated item was 'How achieving the qualification at the end motivates you to complete the course' ('excellent' or 'good' = 75%; 'poor' or 'very poor' = 6%). The lowest rated item was How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course' ('excellent' or 'good' = 54%; 'poor' or 'very poor' = 19%). This table is interesting because it suggests that the strongest forms of student motivation are those that are linked directly to students' success on their course, their motivation to progress and their interest in the subject area. These elements of motivation concern 'The intrinsic interest in learning and/or participating in learning' highlighted by Sellers & van der Velden (2003:17) and appear to be more important to students than extrinsic 'sticks' (jn the form of college rules on attendance) or 'carrots' (in the form of the Education Maintenance Allowance).

Measures that would improve student motivation to complete courses

Respondents among the first cohort of students surveyed made a total of 56 suggestions for how their college could improve students' motivation to complete courses. Most comments related to four of the 9 strategies for improving student retention being considered here: teaching and learning (14 comments); course assessment (10 comments); college support (10 comments); and course management (9 comments).

In relation to teaching and learning, students' comments centred upon the quality of the relationship between teachers and students and on measures that would enhance students' learning:

> *"Teachers should be friendlier with the students"*
>
> *"Teachers listening to the students carefully"*
>
> *"More practical activities"*

Comments in relation to course assessment mainly took the form of requests for better organisation of, and preparation of students for, coursework assignments:

> *"They have to give students more time to complete their coursework"*

> *"Do not let all coursework happen at once"*
>
> *"Teachers should explain the work more clearly – so students can do their work and pass"*

Students' comments on the support provided by their college ranged from general calls for more help to be made available to those that need it (e.g. *"Students who struggle should get more help"*) to specific calls for better ICT facilities and more financial support to be made available to students. Course management was seen as having a bearing on students' motivation in a number of different ways, from basic organisational issues (*"Teachers don't cancel lessons"*) to college rules on attendance and punctuality (*"Be a bit more tolerant with students' punctuality"*) and opportunities for students to have a greater say in the management of their course (*"Give more chance to the students to express their point of view"*).

Seven of the comments made reference to students' motivation, with 4 respondents proposing some form of incentives to improve students' motivation, e.g. *"Have awards for students for regular attendance or excellent attendance (100% attendance)"*, *"The student can be awarded a small grant for maybe achieving good grades"*.

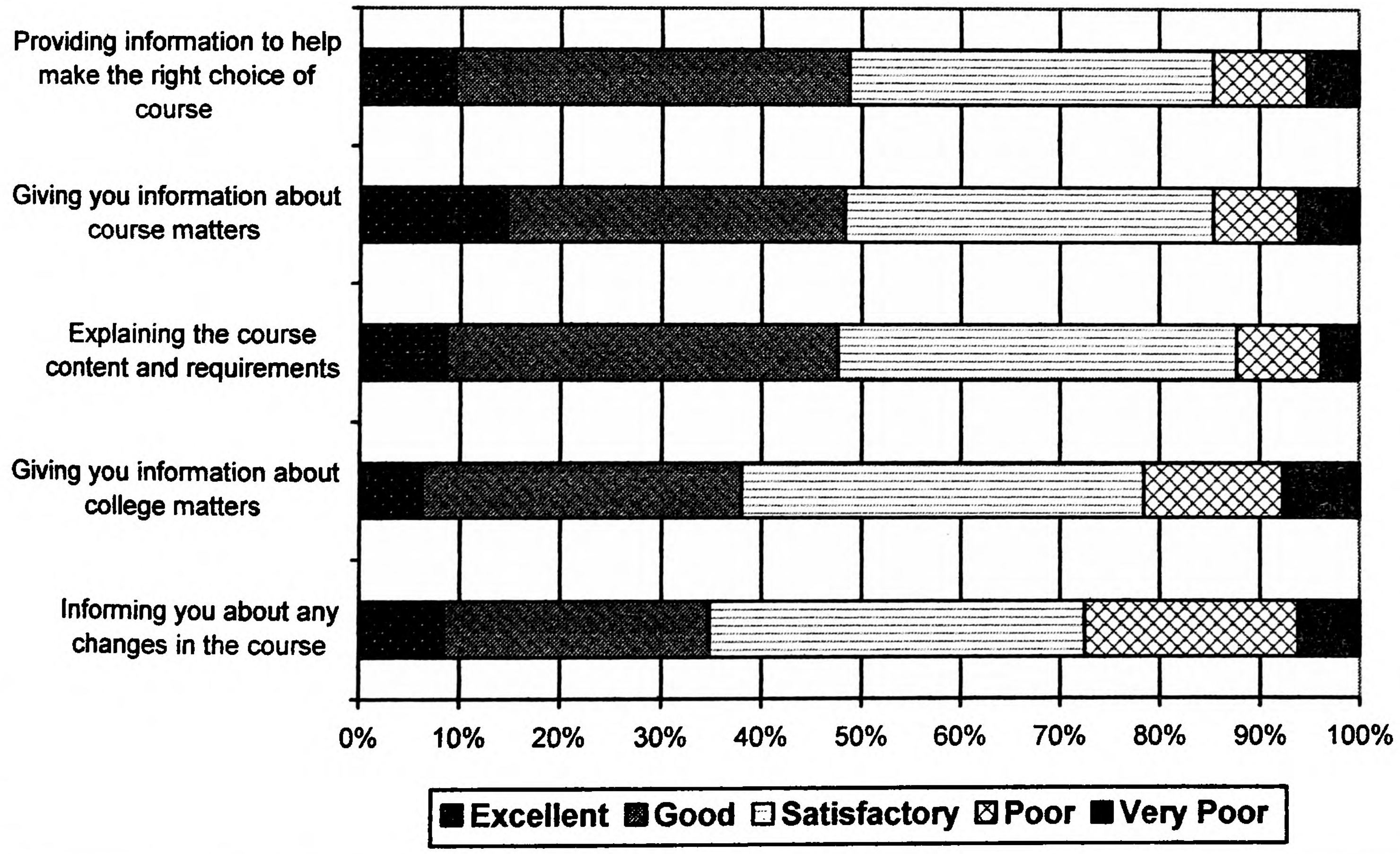
Motivation stands out as the most highly rated of the nine strategies being investigated. There are a number of different ways in which teachers can motivate students, including encouragement and support, good teaching, making students aware of progression opportunities, effective feedback and close monitoring of attendance. However, the view of most students appears to be that their intrinsic interest in their course, together with their desire to pass and achieve the qualification, is of paramount importance. This suggests that it will be important to look at motivation and teaching and learning together as two closely related strategies for improving student retention.

Strategy 4: Communication

How communication was rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate communication (figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7 - Students' ratings of items linked to communication (n=218)



Among the overall responses to the 5 items on communication, the most highly rated item was 'Providing information to help you make the right choice of course' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 49%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 15%). The lowest rated item was 'Informing you about any changes in the course' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 35%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 28%). Interestingly, the item 'Giving you information about college matters' received somewhat lower ratings than 'Giving you information about course matters'. This finding tends to reinforce the impression that the two colleges were more successful in communicating with students at the level of their course than they were at communicating with them in relation to college-level strategies (see the earlier discussion of induction and course management.)

Views on how communication could be improved

Respondents among the first cohort of students surveyed offered three main types of suggestions for how communication with students could be improved. Firstly, there were 5 comments calling for communication to be clearer:

> *"Speak more clearly"*
>
> *"Explain more clearly to the students"*

Secondly, there were comments from 6 respondents about the need for more consultation and student involvement in decision-making:

> *"Listen to opinions and suggestions"*
>
> *"Ask students for their opinions"*

Thirdly, there were practical suggestions concerning the best ways for the college to communicate information to students. The main suggestion here was for more meetings between students and their tutors, both on a one-to-one basis and in the form of class meetings (this suggestion was made by 6 respondents). Other suggestions included using noticeboards and posters in the college, email and text messaging.

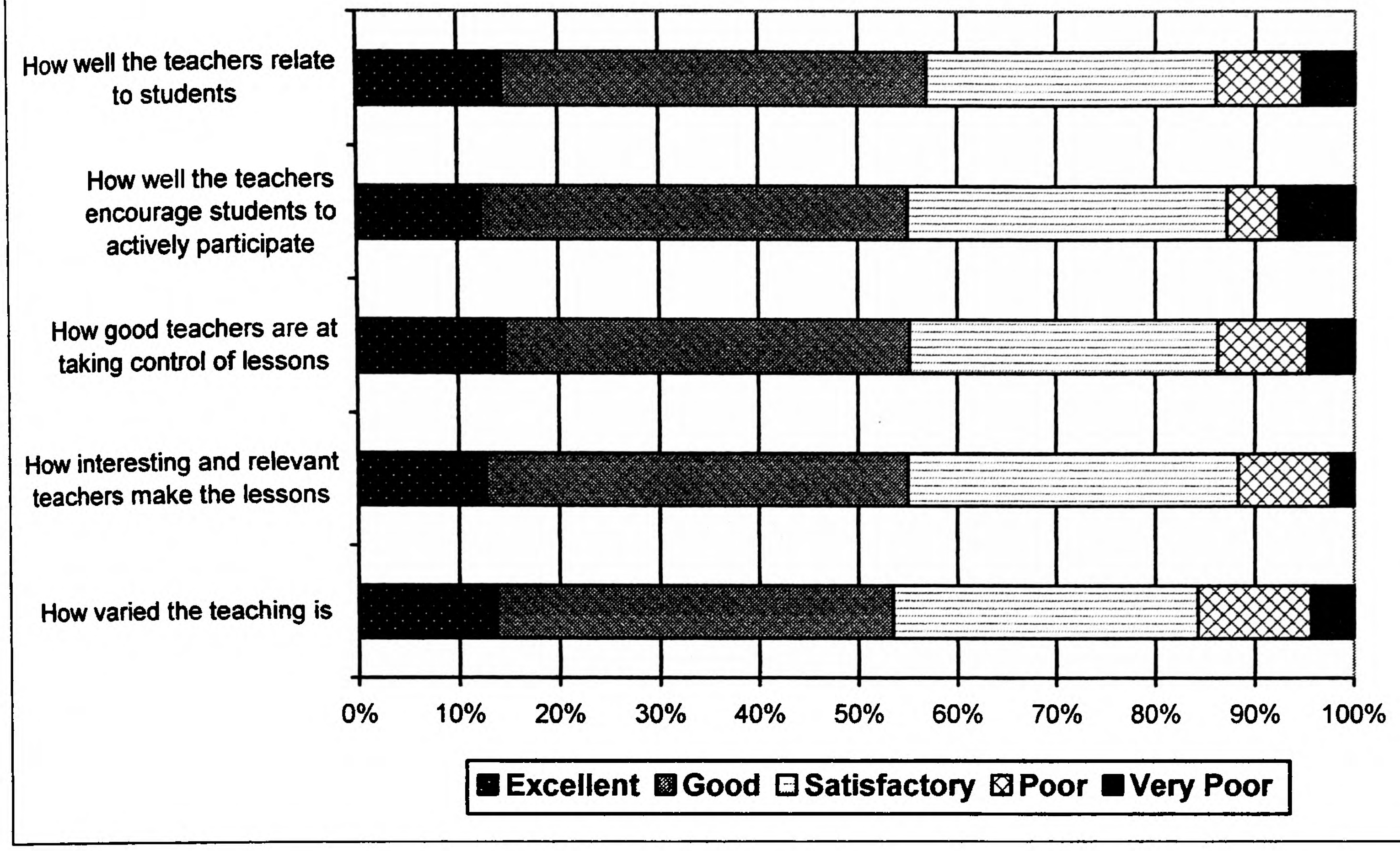
Overall, students' ratings of the items on communication placed it sixth out of the nine strategies (figure 4.13 at the end of this section). In the context of some of the findings presented earlier, it is interesting to note that students felt that communication was better in relation to course matters than in relation to college matters (with the exception of information about changes in the course, which received the lowest rating). Some of the students interviewed also drew attention to the fact that communication is a two-way process, and that communication might be improved by college staff listening more to the concerns of students.

Strategy 5: Teaching and Learning

How teaching and learning was rated by students in the two colleges

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate the teaching and learning on their course (figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8 - Students' ratings of items linked to teaching and learning (n=218)



All 5 of the items on teaching and learning received very similar ratings from the survey respondents as a whole. The most highly rated item was 'How well the teachers relate to students (e.g. supportive, treating students with respect, having a good rapport)' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 57%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 16%). The lowest rated item, 'How varied the teaching is', was only marginally different ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 54%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 16%). In line with the LSC's national Learner Satisfaction Survey (LSC, 2005b), these data suggest that the students surveyed were generally quite satisfied with the quality of teaching and learning. However, staff in both of the colleges would surely like to see greater proportions of their students rating aspects of their teaching as 'excellent', rather than 'very good' or 'satisfactory' – so it appears that there is some room for improvement here. Nonetheless, among the nine retention strategies, the implementation of teaching and learning was ranked second, behind motivation (figure 4.13 at the end of this section). Teaching and learning in the two colleges will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, which considers staff views and data from classroom observations.

Strategy 6: Course Assessment

Students' experiences of course assessment

The majority of respondents among the first cohort surveyed indicated that they understood how they are assessed for their course. Eighty percent (n=106) agreed with the statement 'I understand how my course is assessed' and 75% agreed that 'I clearly understand the assessment criteria on my course' (n=100). The course assessment was seen as being effective by 73% of respondents overall (n=97), with just 16% of respondents disagreeing with the proposition that 'The assessment on my course is very effective' (n=21). Lower proportions of respondents agreed with statements about assessment feedback and the monitoring of their progress: 70% agreed that 'I get regular feedback on my coursework' (n=93); 66% agreed that 'I am well informed about my progress over the year' (n=88); 56% agreed with that 'I have an Individual Learning Plan to monitor my progress' (n=75); and 53% agreed with the statement 'I am involved in tracking assignments' (n=70). Half of the respondents (50%, n=67) agreed that 'There is too much assessment on the course'.

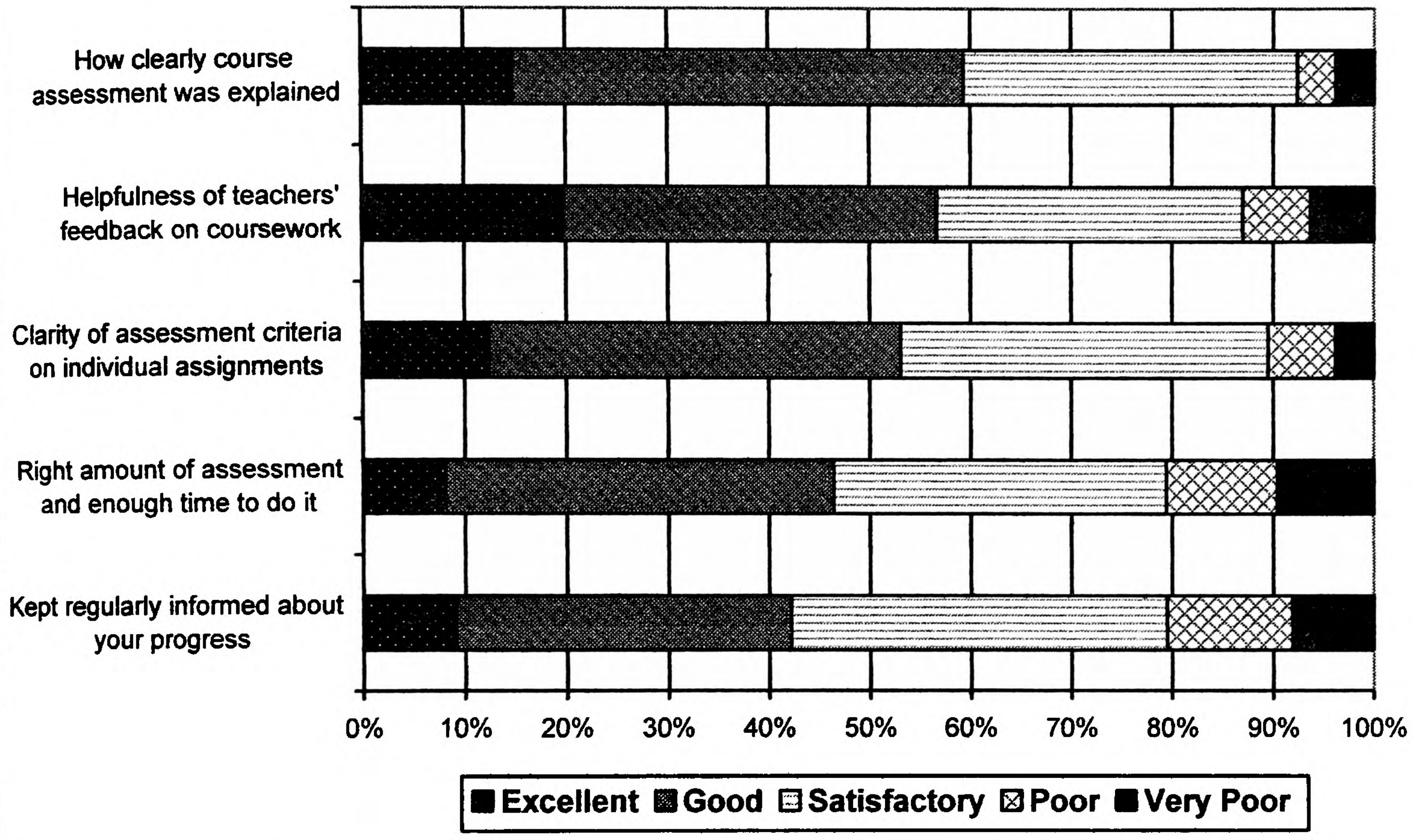
In response to an open question about how they are informed about their progress on the course, respondents most frequently referred to their teacher/tutor (mentioned in 37 out of the 49 responses). Comments referred mainly to verbal feedback through one-to-one meetings with tutors, although two respondents mentioned written comments or reports on assignments and another referred to a progress file. Other respondents mentioned having a letter sent to their home and being informed of their progress during a learning review week. Respondents were most likely to say that they are informed about their progress on a termly basis (12 respondents) or following each assignment (10 respondents).

How course assessment was rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate the assessment for their course (figure 4.9).

Among the overall responses to the 5 items on course assessment, the most highly rated item was 'How clearly the assessment for the course has been explained to you' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 59%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 8%). The lowest rated item was 'Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year (e.g. teachers talking to you, individual tutorials, Individual Learning Plan)' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 42%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 21%). This figure shows that students were generally happy with the way in which the assessment for their course was explained to them, the helpfulness of feedback on coursework and the clarity of assessment criteria for individual assignments. However, it also suggests that students would like to be informed on a more regular basis about how they are progressing with their course.

Figure 4.9 - Students' ratings of items linked to course assessment (n=218)



Students' views on how assessment could be improved

Among the first cohort of students surveyed, the most frequently made suggestion for improving the course assessment (made by 10 respondents) was requests for better explanations to be given when assignments are being set. For example:

> *"Teachers should talk in more detail about the assignments"*

> *"Teachers should always example the criteria, question"*

Three others called for teachers to spend more time talking to students about assessment generally. The same number of respondents said that course assessment would be improved by a move to a graded marking system rather than Pass/Fail. Five respondents expressed their satisfaction with the present assessment arrangements for their courses, as in the following comment:

> *"I think the teachers do everything for students to understand the assessment and the criteria are covered and fully understandable"*

Overall, course assessment was ranked fourth out of the nine strategies in terms of its effectiveness (figure 4.13 at the end of this section). Generally course assessment appeared to be well understood by the students and the main complaints were about not being given enough time in which to complete assessments and not being informed regularly enough about progress throughout the year.

Strategy 7: Student Support

Experiences of student support

During the interviews and focus group, the main sources of support that were identified by students in the two colleges were their teachers (mentioned by 41 students out of a total of 75 participants in the interviews and focus group) and learning resources such as the library and computer facilities (mentioned by 24 students). EMA was mentioned by more students in College A (9 out of 26 students interviewed, and 4 in the focus group) than College B (3 out of 29 students interviewed). Only a minority of students in each college referred to additional learning support (10 in College A and 6 in College B).

Students in college A identified a range of sources of support for their learning within the college. The most frequently mentioned of these related to the help they receive from their teachers, either through the quality of lectures/classes or the help they can provide at other times such as during tutorials. This was mentioned by 16 of the students interviewed individually and 17 of those who participated in the focus group interview. Comments on the support provided by the teachers included the following:

> *"The support is there whenever I need it. The tutors are very supportive"* (A15)
>
> *"I attend regular classes with good teachers"* (A14)

Learning resources, particularly through the college library and computing facilities, were mentioned by 12 of the individually interviewed students as supporting them with their learning. Financial support, mainly in the form of EMA, was identified by 11 students (plus 4 in the focus group) as a way in which they are supported with their learning. For example: *"College gives financial support through EMA, which helps me to buy some facilities for my study"* (A20). However, one student indicated that there was a gap in support here because not all students are eligible for EMA. Additional learning support staff in the college, particularly in the form of college learning advisors, was cited by 7 students (plus 3 in the focus group interview) as supporting them with their learning.

The students from college B mentioned learning resources such as library and computing facilities most often as being one of the ways in which the college supports them with their learning (mentioned by 12 out of the 29 students interviewed). For example, *"The college provides us with a library which has books and computers"* (B18). Eight students talked about the help and support provided by their teachers, which included support with learning and also more personal support and encouragement:

> *"Helpful teachers who provide notes"* (B28)
>
> *"Teachers offer personal support"* (B19)

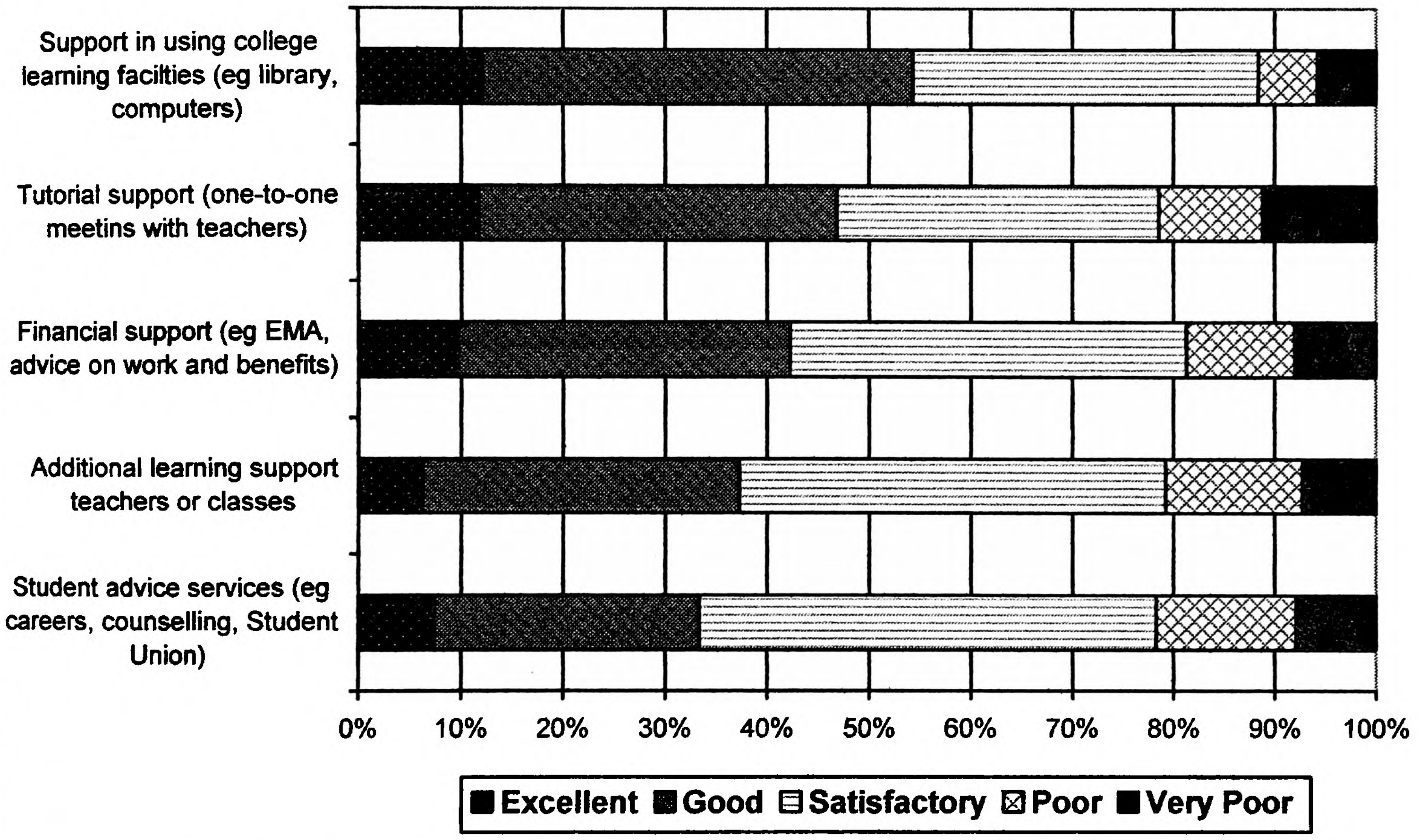
The fact that the students in College B spoke about the support from their teachers in such general terms, but did not specifically mention tutorials, may be important. The most recent inspection report for this college stated that 'Although tutors provide much informal help to learners, insufficient time is allocated for formal tutorials. The quality of some tutorial practice is poor. Students' attendance at tutorials is low and is not monitored by staff'.

Additional learning support from the college, for example through student learning advisors and literacy or numeracy support, was mentioned by 6 out of the 29 students interviewed in College B. A further 4 students referred to a peer support through a college 'study buddy' mentoring scheme. Only three of the students interviewed identified EMA as something which the college does to support them with their learning, which may be because this type of financial support was seen by the students as something which is external to the college.

How college support was rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate the support in their college (figure 4.10).

Figure 4.10 - Students' ratings of items linked to college support (n=218)



Among the overall responses to the 5 items on college support, the most highly rated item was 'Support in using college learning facilities (e.g. library, computers)' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 54%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 12%). The lowest rated item was 'Student advice services (e.g. guidance on careers and further study, counselling service, Student Union)' ('Excellent' or 'Good' =

33%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 22%). Tutorial support received the second highest ratings among the items on college support ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 47%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 21%).

Views on the role of college support in encouraging student retention

When students were asked directly how college support can help ensure better student retention, the type of support that was most frequently mentioned by respondents among the first cohort surveyed was financial support (identified by 7 respondents), which was seen as a motivating factor for students:

> *"EMA keeps me in college"*

> *"EMA helps to motivate me"*

And financial support was also seen as important because it helps some students to pay for travel, books and food:

> *"Extra financial support so I can get to college and eat food"*

Four respondents mentioned tutorial support, with one saying that the tutorials *"keep me on track"*; and a further four respondents identified the college staff as being supportive and providing *"good advice"*. Maths support was mentioned by four respondents and English support by three respondents as helping them to improve in these areas.

Five respondents called for improved financial support for students. Three respondents said that there should be more study support available, with a further four students requesting more time and support from their teachers and during class time. Other suggestions were that students should receive more feedback on their progress, that students should be made more aware of other courses that are available to them in the college, that there should be more ongoing support and guidance through personal advisors and that the college should listen to students more.

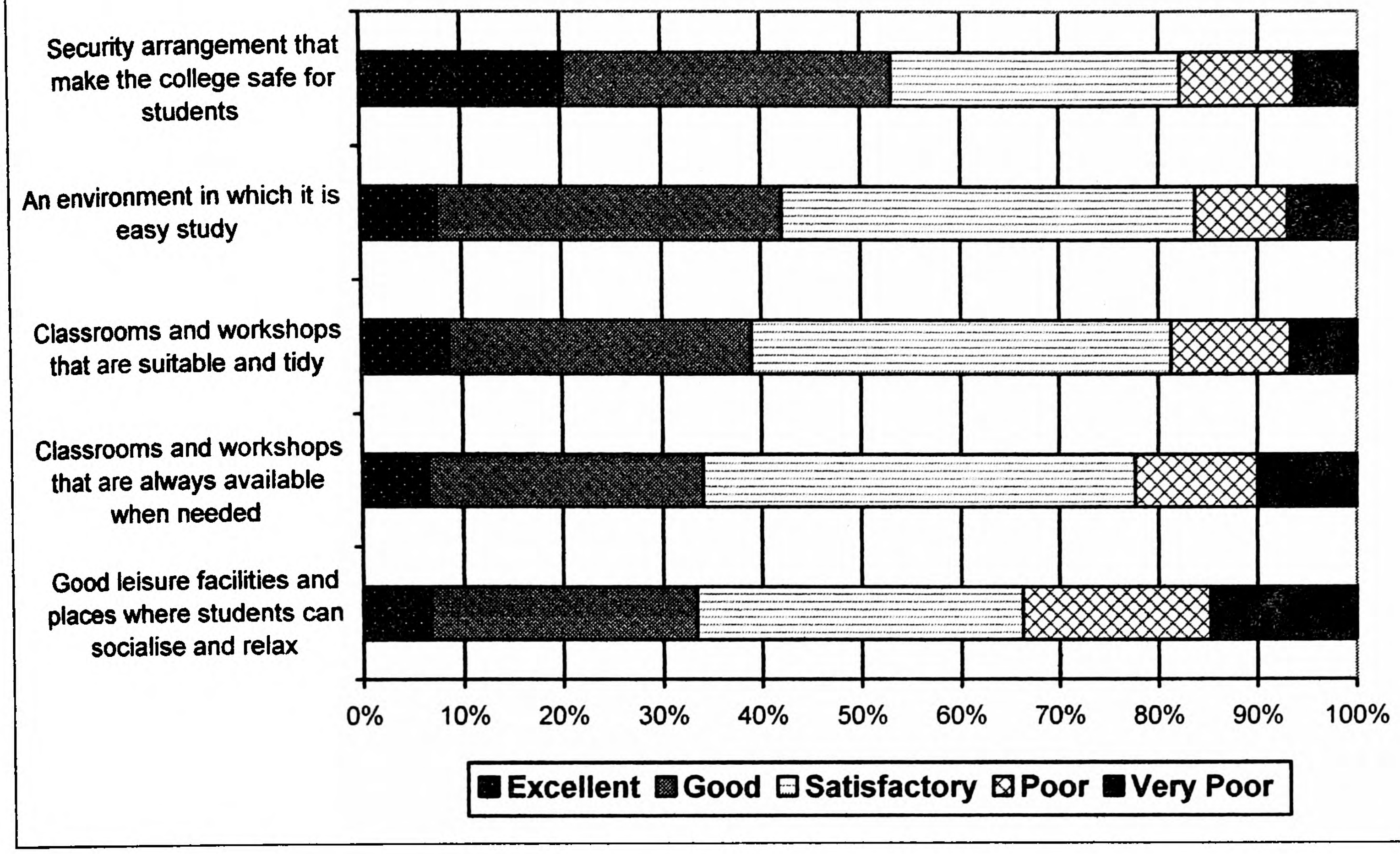
Overall, student support was one of the lowest rated of the nine retention strategies being investigated. As figure 4.13 shows (at the end of this section), student support was ranked seventh out of the nine strategies. Less than half of the students interviewed rated the support provided through tutorials, financial support, additional learning support and student advice services as being 'excellent' or 'good' (figure 4.10). The questionnaire and student interviews both pointed to the support of course teachers and college learning facilities (such as the library) as being the more helpful sources of support to students.

Strategy 8: College Environment

How the college environment was rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate the college environment (figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11 - Students' ratings of items linked to the college environment (n=218)



Among the overall responses to the 5 items on the college environment, the most highly rated item was 'Security arrangements that make the college safe for students' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 53%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 18%). The lowest rated item was 'Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 33%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 34%). The other three items – 'an environment in which it is easy to study', 'classrooms and workshops that are suitable and tidy' and 'classrooms and workshops that are always available when needed' – all have a direct bearing on students' learning. It should perhaps be of concern to the two colleges that only between 34 and 42 per cent of the students surveyed rated these aspects of the learning environment as being 'excellent' or 'good'. Problems with the suitability of classrooms were picked up in College A's most recent inspection report, which noted that 'Some rooms are used inappropriately. For example, some classrooms are too small for the size of the group'.

Overall, the college environment was lowly ranked among the nine strategies, coming eighth out of nine (figure 4.13, at the end of this section). This suggests that there is plenty of room for improvement in this area.

Strategy 9: Quality Assurance

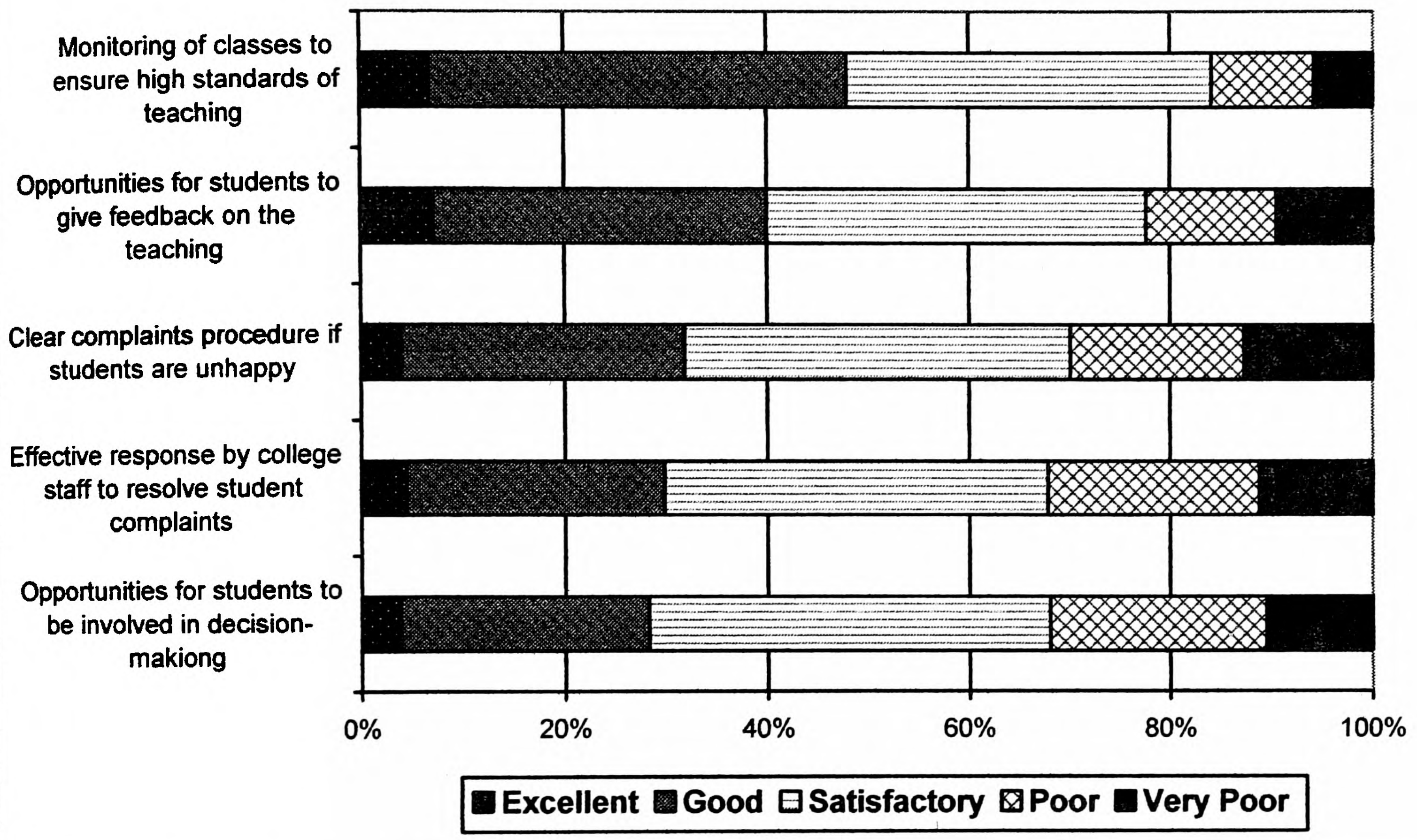
Students' views on quality assurance

Fifty eight percent of respondents among the first cohort surveyed said that it is always true or quite true that they would recommend their course to others (n=78) and 53% said that it is always true or quite true that they would recommend the college to others (n=70). However, respondents' responses to other statements indicate that they felt that there is plenty of room for improvement: 61% said that it is always true or quite true that 'The college should do more to encourage hard working students to stay on courses' (n=81); 54% said that it is always true or quite true that 'The college should introduce tighter measures to improve students' discipline' (n=72); less than half of respondents said that it is always true or quite true that 'College staff treat students fairly' (46%, n=61); and just 34% of respondents said that it is always true or quite true that 'Student complaints are always resolved' (n=45). Forty one percent of respondents said that it is always true or quite true that 'The college has regular inspection of classes' (n=54).

How quality assurance processes were rated by students

Students in the second cohort to be surveyed were asked to rate items on quality assurance in their college (figure 4.12).

Figure 4.12 - Students' ratings of items linked to quality assurance processes (n=218)



Among the overall responses to the 5 items on the quality assurance, the most highly rated item was 'Monitoring of classes by the college to ensure high standards of teaching' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 48%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 16%). The lowest rated item was 'Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course (e.g. student reps)' ('Excellent' or 'Good' = 28%; 'Poor' or 'Very poor' = 32%).

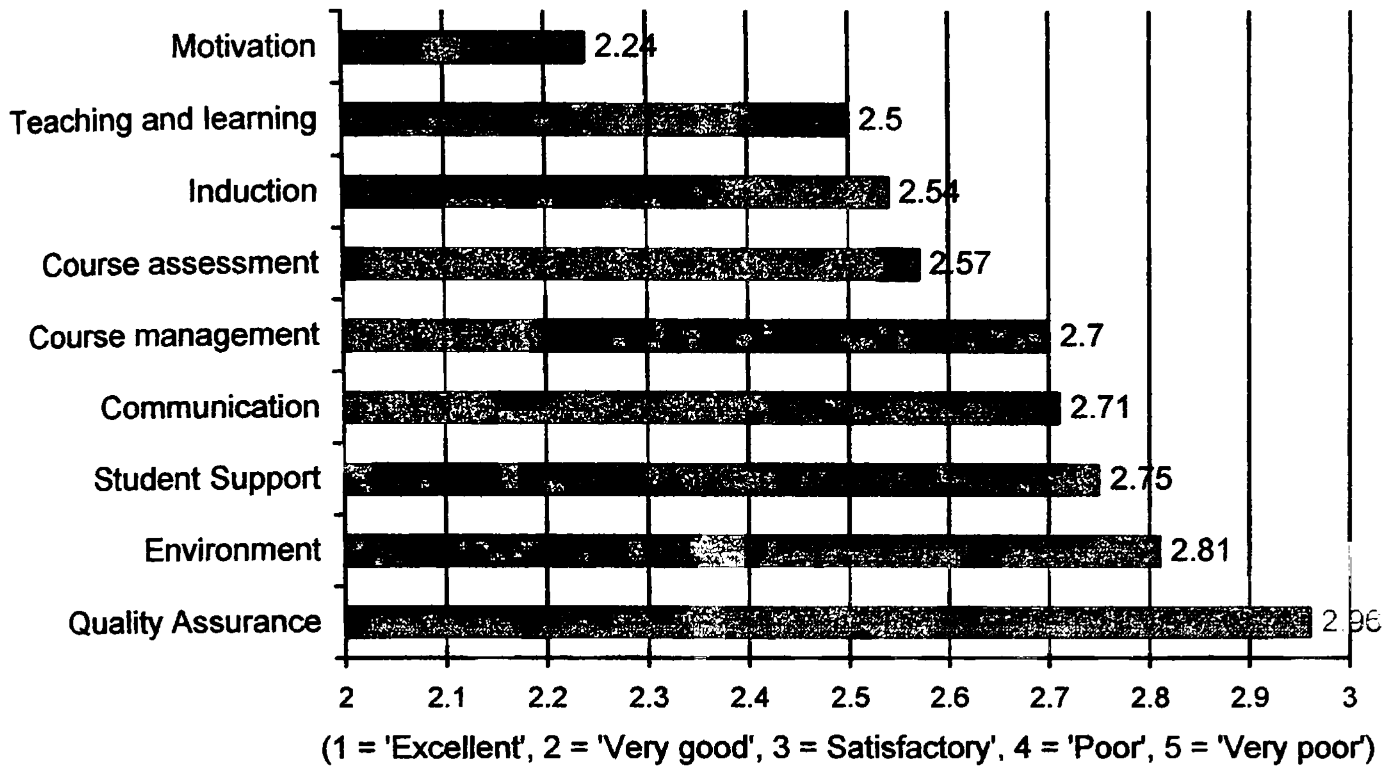
Overall, Quality Assurance was the lowest ranked of all of the nine retention strategies (figure 4.13 below), with particularly low ratings given for the clarity of complaints procedures, the response by college staff to resolve student complaints and opportunities for students to be involved in decision making. Although slightly higher ratings were given for 'Opportunities for students to give feedback on the teaching' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 40% of respondents), it appears that a real area of weakness, from the perspective of students, is in the lack of responsiveness to students' views.

Comparing the nine strategies

By combining the mean ratings given by students to the five response items for each of the nine retention strategies it is possible to look at students' overall assessment of the implementation of each strategies. Figure 4.13 provides this comparison and a full breakdown can be found in Appendix 11. The table in figure 4.13 presents the data differently from the most of the other tables, in that it is based upon the mean ratings given to sets of items – in this case, *lower* values indicate *greater* student satisfaction with each strategy (because the scaling was 1 = 'Excellent' and 5 = 'Very Poor').

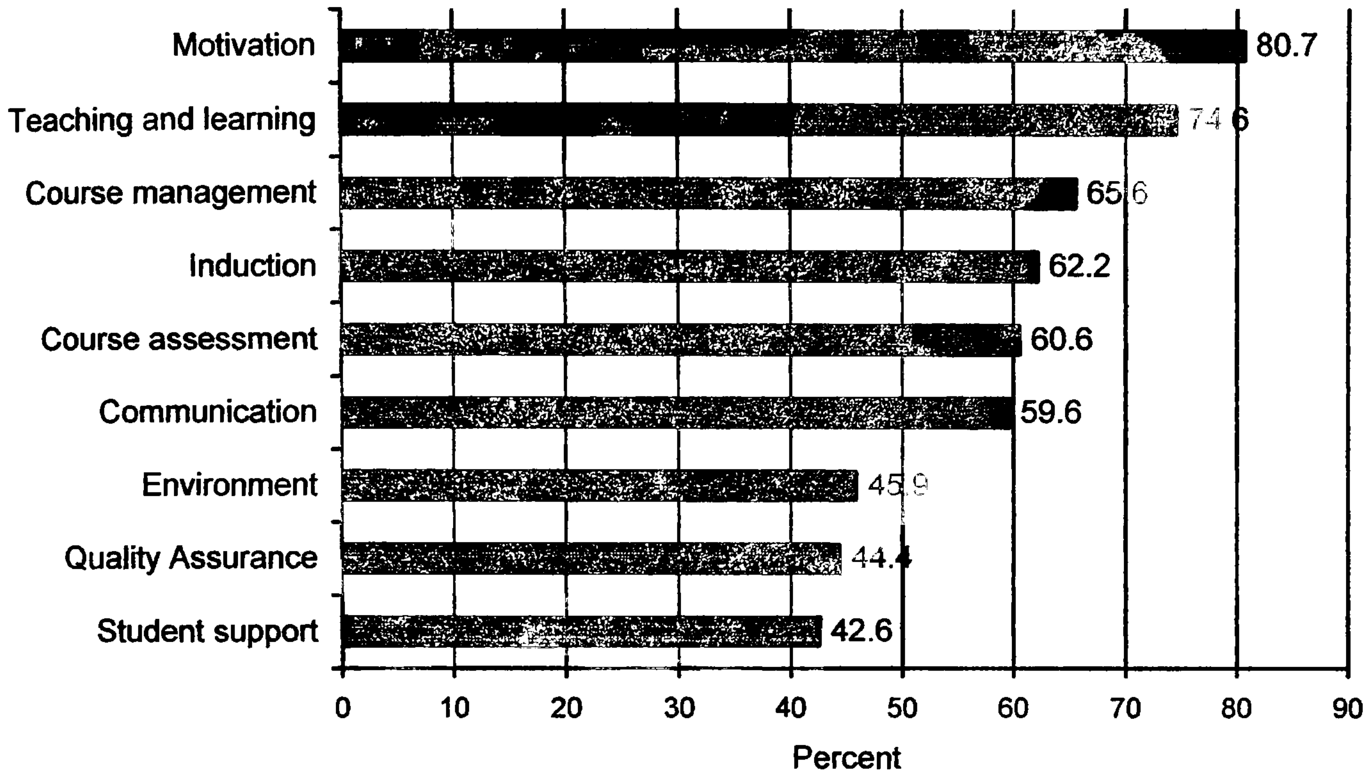
It can be seen from figure 4.13 that the type of retention strategy that students rated as being most effectively implemented was motivation-linked factors (with a mean rating of 2.24). This was followed by teaching and learning (mean rating of 2.50), induction (2.54) and course assessment (2.57). The strategies given the lowest ratings for their implementation were quality assurance (2.96), college environment (2.81) and college support (2.75).

Figure 4.13 - Mean ratings given for the implementation of each retention strategy (n=218).



What is striking about figure 4.13, when viewed alongside figure 4.1 (reproduced below), is how similarly students ranked the nine retention strategies in terms of their general importance *and* how effectively they were seen to be being implemented in the two colleges. Thus motivation was rated by students as being the most important strategy for ensuring their retention (seen as 'very important' by 81% of respondents) and the five items linked to motivation were also most highly rated for the effectiveness of their implementation (e.g. 75% of respondents gave a rating of 'excellent' or 'good' to the item 'How achieving the qualification at the end motivates you to complete the course'). Meanwhile quality assurance ranked 8th out of the 9 strategies in terms of how importantly it was viewed by students (just 44% of respondents stated that it was 'very important') and, correspondingly, the five items linked to quality assurance were given the lowest mean ranking (2.96) for how effectively they were implemented (e.g. only 28% of respondents gave a rating of 'Excellent' or 'Good' to the item 'Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course').

Figure 4.1 - Percentage of students describing each retention strategy as 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course (n=218)



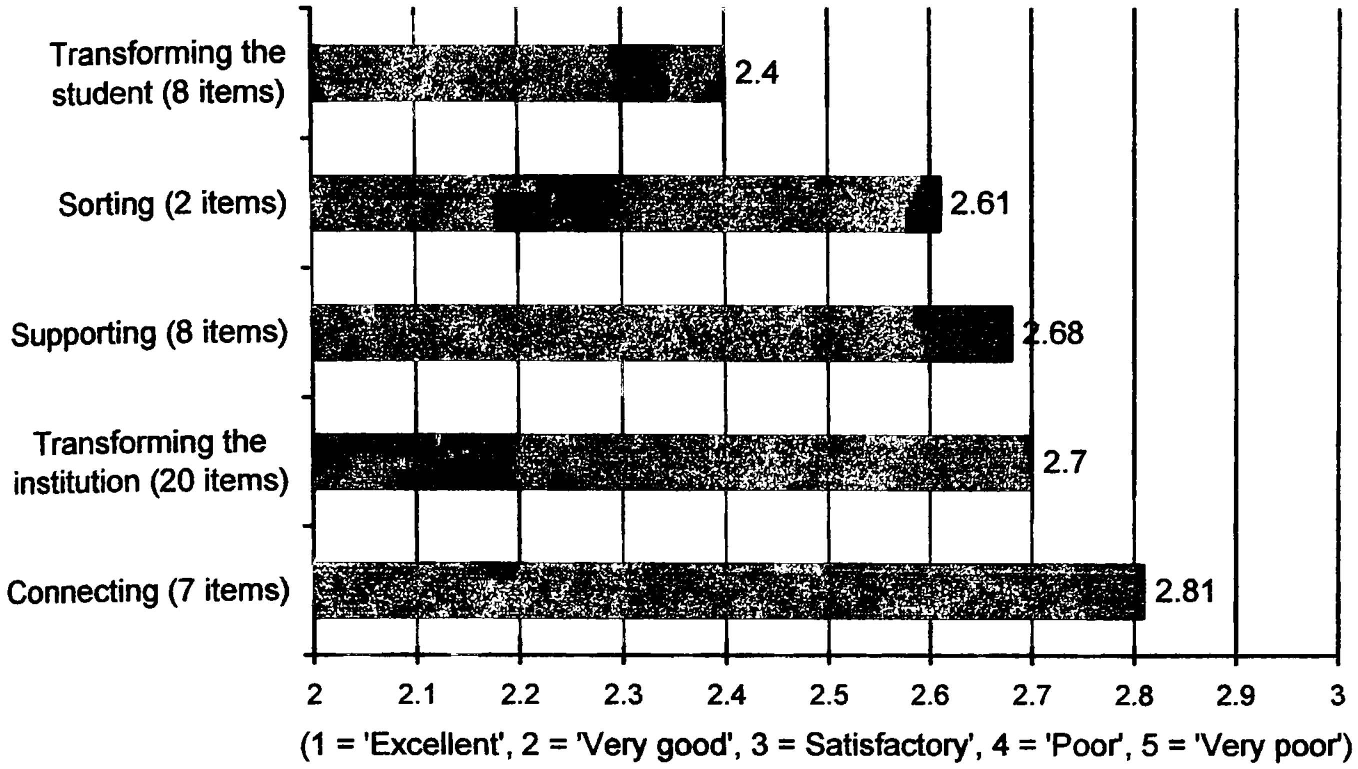
The similarities between how students said that their college was doing in implementing each strategy (figure 4.13) and what they think is important in their own retention (figure 4.1) is interesting. This could be interpreted in two ways: Firstly, it could be interpreted as showing that the colleges are doing relatively better in the areas that really matter to students; alternatively, it could be that the strategies which students perceive as being most important simply reflects how well they are being implemented by their college. So, for example, students might have attached greater importance to areas such as student support and Quality Assurance if these strategies were being more effectively implemented. Another possibility is that students may be more aware of some strategies than others: it is reasonable to suppose that students will know more about what motivates them, and about the quality of the teaching and learning on their course, than about strategies which are further removed from their day-to-day concerns (such as student support, Quality Assurance, the college environment and communication).

For these reasons it is important not to dismiss any of the strategies as unimportant. What we can conclude, however, is that motivation and teaching and learning are the two factors that stand out as being most important in the students' eyes for ensuring their retention – and that these two strategies were seen as being the most effectively implemented in the two colleges.

Sorting, Connecting, Supporting and Transforming

Another way of analysing the data generated from the survey with the second cohort of students is to re-group the 45 individual response items according to Beatty-Guenter's categories, as adapted by Johnston (2001), of 'sorting', 'connecting', 'supporting', 'transforming the student' and 'transforming the institution' (see Appendix 8). Figure 4.14 shows how students rated the implementation of the different retention strategy items using this typology.

Figure 4.14 - Mean ratings given for the implementation of different types of retention strategy, using Beatty-Guenter (n218).



It can be seen from this that the colleges were seen by students to be most effectively implementing items concerned with 'transforming the student' (e.g. 'How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons'), with a mean rating of 2.40, whereas they were seen to be least effectively implementing items concerned with connecting the student with the institution (e.g. 'Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff'), mean rating = 2.81. This is interesting because it reinforces the finding that the colleges were doing well in implementing strategies around motivation and teaching and learning (that is, those which transform the student), but suggests much more clearly than when looking at the nine strategies alone that there is an issue to be addressed around connecting students to the institution. The lower mean ratings given to items concerned with 'supporting' (mean rating = 2.68) and 'transforming the institution' (mean rating = 2.7) serve to reinforce the finding that strategies such as student support and Quality Assurance were being less well implemented in Colleges A and B.

The good news for the Business departments within the two colleges is that they were seen to be being more successful in the area that is arguably most important to students' retention and achievement, namely 'transforming the student'. However, the apparent lack of success in 'connecting' students with these institutions could be seen as jeopardising this.

(3) Differences in Students' Responses

Students' evaluations of the effectiveness of the implementation of the 9 retention strategies, based upon the ratings given to the 45 items in the second questionnaire survey, were analysed for differences according to college, course level, age, gender, ethnic background and whether or not they received EMA. The statistical significance of these differences was tested using Chi Square tests, specifying a 95% or higher level of confidence that the differences found were not the result of sample variation (that is, with Chi Square values greater than 3.84 for 2x2 contingency tables and greater than 5.99 for 2x3 tables). Only differences found to be statistically significant by this criterion are reported here (cross-tabs and chi-square tests from SPSS output are shown in Appendix 10).

By far the most frequently occurring differences in the ratings given to items on the implementation of different retention strategies were found in relation to the level of course that students were on: level 3 students were more likely than level 2 students to give positive ratings (either 'Excellent' or 'Good') on 20 out of the 45 items; while there were no items on which level 2 students gave more favourable ratings than those on level 3 courses. The level 3 students were somewhat more likely than the level 2 students to be female (48.1% vs. 32.9%), not to be receiving EMA (55.6% vs. 46.2%), and to be black (43.2% vs. 36.7%).

Statistically significant differences were also found in relation to ethnic background, whether or not students received EMA, what college they were from, their gender and age. Black students were found to be more likely than Asian students and/or those from 'White and other' backgrounds to give a rating of 'Excellent' or 'Good' on 8 out of the 45 items in the survey. In relation to EMA and gender the direction of the differences varied between different items – there were some items on which those receiving EMA gave higher ratings than those who did not receive this allowance, and vice versa; similarly, female respondents gave higher ratings than male students on three items, but there was one item on which male students gave higher ratings.

Course level differences

Level 3 students were more likely than level 2 students to give positive ratings (either 'Excellent' or 'Good') on 20 out of the 45 items in the second survey (table 4.15). These 20 items spanned 7 out of the 9 retention strategies under investigation (the exceptions being college support and the college environment). The fact that course level differences were not found in relation to any items on the two main strategies that operate at the college level, that is college support and the college environment, further reinforces the interpretation that differences between course levels may be more significant than differences between colleges. There were no items on which level 2 students were more likely to give positive ratings than level 3 students.

A wide range of aspects of college retention strategies were consistently rated more favourably by students on the higher level courses. For example, in relation to induction, 56% of level 3 students rated the information they were given about college support services (item 1d) as being 'Excellent' or 'Good', compared to just 35% of level 2 students; on the management of their course, 57% of level 3 students rated the approachability and accessibility of course staff (item 2b) as 'Excellent' or 'Good', compared to just 42% of level 2 students; and on teaching and learning, 65% of level 3 students rated their teachers' ability to make lessons interesting and relevant (item 5a) as 'Excellent' or 'Good', compared to just 38% of level 2 students.

These findings are important, given that national data has indicated 'that retention rates vary inversely with the level of programme studied... withdrawal rates for programmes at entry, level 1 and level 2 are higher than programmes at level 3' (Martinez, 1997a:47). If the level 2 students in Colleges A and B were less satisfied with the implementation of a wide range of aspects of retention strategies, as this data has shown, then this fact is likely to make them more prone to dropping out of their courses. This suggests that particular attention needs to be paid to ensuring that students at level 2 get at least as good a service as other groups of students, and that they are made fully aware of strategies and systems that have been put in place for their benefit.

Table 4.15 – Differences in ratings given to different items according to course level, showing Chi Square test results (n=218)

Strategy / Item	level 3 students giving 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	level 2 students giving 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	x^2	p
Induction 1a Having the content and requirements of your course clearly explained	66.4	50.7	5.004	.025
1c Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities)	70.4	55.3	4.554	.033
1d Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students)	56.4	35.1	8.598	.003
1e Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff	48.9	21.6	14.823	.000
Course management 2a Overall organisation of your course	59.1	42.5	5.502	.019
2b How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are	57.1	41.8	4.687	.039
2c How quickly the staff on your course deal with students' problems	55.5	32.9	9.754	.002
2d How fairly the staff on your course deal with students' problems	46.2	31.6	4.219	.040
Motivation 3a How well course teachers motivate you to complete the course	75.2	50.0	14.069	.000
3b How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it	72.2	55.1	6.360	.012
Communication 4a Providing information to help you make the right choice of course	55.9	36.4	7.496	.006
4b Explaining the content and requirements of your course	52.9	38.2	4.272	.039
4c Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments)	54.1	38.5	4.825	.028
Teaching and Learning 5a How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons	64.9	38.0	14.581	.000
5b How good teachers are at taking control of lessons	62.7	42.3	8.279	.004
5c How varied the teaching is (e.g. using different learning materials, different activities)	64.4	34.2	17.870	.000
Course Assessment 6b How clear the assessment criteria are on individual assignments you are given	59.5	42.3	5.831	.016
6c How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work	65.4	42.3	10.576	.001
6e Being given the right amount of assessment and a reasonable amount of time in which to do it	55.7	30.8	12.234	.000
Quality Assurance 9e Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course (e.g. student reps)	34.6	16.5	7.295	.007

Ethnic background differences

Differences in how elements of the different retention strategies were rated were also found in relation to ethnic background. Black students were more likely than Asian students and/or those from 'White and other' backgrounds to give a rating of 'Excellent' or 'Good' on 8 out of the 45 items in the second survey (table 4.16)..

Table 4.16 shows that several aspects of college retention strategies were rated more favourably by Black students than by those from other ethnic backgrounds. For example, on motivation factors, 77% of Black students described their interest in the course content (item 3b) as 'Excellent' or 'Good' in motivating them to complete it, compared to 63% of Asian students and 51% of students from 'White and other' backgrounds; on course assessment, 68% of Black students rated the helpfulness of teachers' feedback on their coursework (item 6c) as 'Excellent' or 'Good', compared to 49% of the Asian students and 50% of those from 'White and other' backgrounds; and on college support, 54% of Black students rated tutorial support (item 7a) as 'Excellent' or 'Good', compared to 48% of Asian students and just 27% of students from 'White and other' backgrounds.

Table 4.16 – Differences in ratings given to different items according to ethnic background, showing Chi Square test results (n=218)

Strategy / Item	**Black students giving 'excellent' or 'good' rating %**	**Asian students giving 'excellent' or 'good' rating %**	**White / Other giving 'excellent' or 'good' rating %**	x^2	p
Induction 1b Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course (e.g. speaking with you about this, giving you a test)	66.7	45.0	45.7	9.004	.011
Motivation 3b How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it	77.4	62.8	51.4	8.596	.014
3e How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course	60.3	57.7	32.1	6.948	.031
Teaching and Learning 5a How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons	64.7	52.3	41.2	6.114	.047
Course Assessment 6c How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work	68.2	49.4	50.0	7.017	.030
College Support 7a Tutorial support (one-to-one meetings with your teachers)	54.1	48.1	27.3	6.919	.031
7c Support in using college learning facilities	65.6	50.6	41.9	6.525	.038
Quality Assurance 9b Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course	55.4	31.0	26.5	13.706	.001

These findings are interesting because they are the opposite of what might have been expected, given that studies into student drop-out have found Black students (and certain groups of Asian students) as being at greatest risk of non-completion (e.g. Hooper, 2000; Martinez, 1997a). However, in the Business Studies courses in Colleges A and B the Black students appear to have given the highest ratings on how the above aspects of retention strategies (shown in table 4.16) were being implemented. It can be seen from table 4.16 that five out of the eight items receiving higher ratings from Black students involve staff-student relationships. These are: (1b) 'Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course'; (5a) 'How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons'; (6c) 'How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work'; (7a) 'Tutorial support (one-to-one meetings with your teachers)'; and (7c) 'Support in using college learning facilities'). One possible interpretation of these results is that the staff in Colleges A and B might relate more effectively to their Black students than to those from Asian and, most especially, White backgrounds (although this cannot be proven, because this was not a direct focus of my investigation). In the Business departments of both College A and B, more of the teachers were Black than from any other ethnic background (this was reflected in the backgrounds of those I interviewed; see table 5.1 in the next chapter) – a fact which might help to explain the higher ratings given by Black students to some aspects of retention strategies.

Differences according to whether or not students received EMA

In relation to whether or not students received EMA, statistically significant differences were found on 6 out of the 45 items in the second survey (table 4.17).

Table 4.17 – Differences in ratings given to different items according to whether or not students received EMA, showing Chi Square test results (n=218)

Strategy / Item	EMA students 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	Non-EMA students 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	x^2	p
Induction 1e Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff	32.3	46.2	4.014	.045
Motivation 3e How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course	62.7	43.8	6.351	.012
Course Assessment 6d Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year	32.0	52.4	8.671	.003
College Environment 8e Security arrangements that make the college safe for students	62.0	45.2	5.788	.016
Quality Assurance 9b Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course	31.0	48.6	6.589	.010
9d Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints	23.7	36.9	4.095	.043

Not surprisingly, table 4.17 shows those who received EMA were more likely to give a rating of 'Excellent' or 'Good' to item 3e 'How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course'. More surprising was the finding that those who received EMA were more likely than those who did not to positively rate college security. Item 8e, 'Security arrangements that make the college safe for students', was rated as 'Excellent or Good' by 62% of those receiving EMA and 45% of those who did not receive EMA.

Conversely, students who did not receive EMA were significantly more likely than students who received EMA to give a rating of 'Excellent' or 'Good' to the following 4 items: (1e) 'Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff' (rated as 'Excellent or Good' by 46% of those not receiving EMA and 32% of those who did receive EMA); (6d) 'Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year (e.g. teachers talking to you, individual tutorials, Individual Learning Plan)' (rated as 'Excellent or Good' by 52% of those not receiving EMA and 32% of those who did receive EMA); (9b) 'Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course' (rated as 'Excellent or Good' by 49% of those not receiving EMA and 31% of those who did receive EMA); and (9d) 'Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints' (rated as 'Excellent or Good' by 37% of those not receiving EMA and 24% of those who did receive EMA).

If EMA can be taken as a proxy for coming from less well-off socio-economic backgrounds (albeit applicable only to those who also meet other EMA criteria linked to age and UK citizenship status), then these findings may be important, for they would suggest that on certain aspects economically worse-off students are less satisfied with the implementation of college retention strategies. Each of the 4 items on which there was a difference here relate to elements of students' relationship with college staff (that is, opportunities to meet a range of staff, being kept informed of their progress, opportunities to give feedback to teachers and effective response to resolve student complaints).

Differences according to which college students were from

Statistically significant differences were found in relation to which college students were from on 5 out of the 45 items on the second survey (table 4.18).

Table 4.18 – Differences in ratings given to different items according to which college students were from, showing Chi Square test results (n=218)

Strategy / Item	College A students 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	College B students 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	x^2	p
Induction 1c Being given information about learning resources in the college	57.8	72.8	5.256	.022
Motivation 3e How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course	45.7	62.6	5.313	.021
Communication 4c Giving you information about course matters (e.g. timetable, classrooms, assignment details)	36.6	61.4	13.057	.000
4d Informing you about any changes in the course	28.0	42.4	4.055	.044
Teaching and Learning 5b How good teachers are at taking control of lessons	44.6	67.0	10.678	.001

Table 4.18 shows that College B students more likely than those from College A to give ratings of 'Excellent' or 'Good' to the following items: (1c) 'Being given information about learning resources in the college' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 73% of College B students and just 58% of College A students); (3e) 'How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 58% of College B students and just 39% of College A students); (4c) 'Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 61% of College B students and just 37% of College A students); (4d) 'Informing you about any changes in the course' (rated as 'Excellent' or

'Good' by 42% of College B students and just 28% of College A students); and (5b) 'How good teachers are at taking control of lessons' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 67% of College B students and just 45% of College A students).

The most striking thing about these data is just how few differences were found between the two colleges. As described in Chapter 1, College A and College B are two very different Further Education Institutions: College A is a large General FE College, with a wide range of students at all levels; College B is a much smaller Sixth Form College that mainly offers level 3 courses to 16-18 year olds. Thus, it is one of the more surprising findings of this study that differences between the two colleges, in terms of how different strategies were rated, were relatively minor. Statistically significant differences between students from the two colleges were found in response to 4 out of the 45 items – much less than the 20 significant differences found according to the level of course that students were on (table 4.15).

Gender differences

On only 4 items (out of 45) were statistically significant gender differences found (table 4.19).

Table 4.19 – Differences in ratings given to different items according to gender, showing Chi Square test results (n=218)

Strategy / Item	Females: 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	Males: 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	x^2	p
Induction 1d Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling, financial support)	61.6	38.7	10.161	.001
1e Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff	49.4	30.6	7.152	.007
Course management 2b How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are	60.7	43.2	6.007	.014
College Environment 8d Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax	24.7	40.5	5.478	.019

Female students were significantly more likely than male students to give a rating of 'Excellent' or 'Good' to the following items: (1d) 'Being given information about other support services in the college' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 62% of female students and just 39% of male students); (1e) 'Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 49% of female students and just 31% of male students); and (2b) 'How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 61% of female students and just 43% of male students). However, male students were significantly more likely than female students to give a rating of 'Excellent' or 'Good' to item 8d, 'Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax' (rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 41% of male students and just 25% of female students). Given that female students have found to be generally more satisfied with their learning than male students (LSC, 2005b), it is not surprising that there were three items which received higher ratings from female students. Perhaps more surprising was the fact that gender differences were not more pronounced than this.

Age differences

The only statistically significant difference found in relation to students' age was on the college environment item 'Security arrangements that make the college safe for students' (item 8e). As shown in table 4.20, security arrangements were rated as 'Excellent' or 'Good' by 57% of 16-19 year olds and just 33% of those aged 20 and over. (Surprisingly perhaps, there were no differences on this item according to gender).

Table 4.20 – Differences in ratings given to different items according to age, showing Chi Square test results (n=218)

Strategy / Item	16-19 year olds: 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	20 years plus: 'excellent' or 'good' rating %	x^2	p
College environment 8e 'Security arrangements that make the college safe for students'	56.8	33.3	6.029	.019

The fact that this was the only statistically significant difference that was found according to age serves to underscore the importance of course level as the major area of difference: level 3 students were significantly more likely to positively rate the implementation of a wide range of aspects of retention strategies, whereas students' age, gender, college and whether or not they received EMA do not appear to be anything like as significant. Alongside course level, ethnic background also emerged as a significant area of difference, with Black students more likely than Asian or White students to positively rate a number of aspects of the implementation of retention strategies.

Summary

Having presented a large amount of data on student perceptions, The section will conclude this chapter by providing a brief recap of what the main findings have been up to this point. These findings, together with some initial thoughts about their implications, will be outlined in relation to the four main thesis research questions introduced in Chapter 2.

1. Identification of the strategies currently used by two FE colleges to promote retention

- On the basis of my review of the literature on student retention in further and higher education, I identified nine main types of retention strategy. These are:
    - Recruitment and induction;
    - Course management;
    - Motivation;
    - Communication;
    - Teaching and learning;
    - Course assessment;
    - Student support;
    - College environment;
    - Quality assurance.

- Evidence that measures were being implemented in all nine of these areas could be found in the Business Studies departments of the two colleges being studied for this investigation (identified through course handbooks and by talking to staff in the colleges).

- Retention strategies can also be classified according to their purposes, and I have found it useful to draw on the work of Beatty-Guenter (1994) to provide an alternative way of looking at measures to improve retention. Beatty-Guenter identified four main types of strategies: 'sorting' strategies; 'supporting' strategies; 'connecting' strategies; and 'transforming' strategies (sub-divided between strategies aimed at transforming the student and those aimed at transforming the institution).

2. Examination of student and staff perceptions of 9 key retention strategies

- Students' responses indicated that they thought that all 9 of the strategies being investigated are important for ensuring their retention. However, some strategies were identified as being more important than others.

- Motivation and teaching and learning stood out as being the two strategies which most students thought were 'very important' for ensuring their retention.

- The strategies which students thought were relatively less important for ensuring that they complete their courses – student support services, quality assurance processes and the college environment – are arguably those which are more remote from students' day-to-day classroom experiences.

- A degree of caution is needed when interpreting these findings, however, because it is possible that the students ascribed greater importance to strategies which they were most familiar with. In other words, it is important to remember that we are dealing here with student *perceptions* and that these may not necessarily mirror the reality of what is taking place. This is why it is also important to consider the views of college staff (to be discussed in Chapter 5).

- Female students were significantly more likely than male students to regard induction, course management, teaching and learning, and college support as being 'very important' – a finding which may reflect the generally higher levels of satisfaction that have been found to exist among female than male students in FE (LSC, 2005b).

3. Investigation into how effectively these strategies are being implemented

- Students in the second cohort to be surveyed using a self-completion questionnaire were asked to rate the implementation of 45 items relating to the nine retention strategies (with each of the nine strategies having 5 constituent items), which allowed direct comparison of the strategies.

- Comparison of the nine strategies measured in this way showed that motivation was considered by students to be the most effective of the strategies. This was followed by teaching and learning, induction, course assessment, course management and communication.

- The three strategies receiving the lowest ratings were Quality Assurance (which ranked ninth out of the nine strategies), the college environment (eighth) and student support (seventh).

- The strategies which students regarded as being most and least effective in their implementation closely matched the way in which students had ordered them in terms of importance. It therefore appears that the colleges were relatively more successful in the areas that mattered most to students, that is motivation and teaching and learning.

- In terms of the categories of retention strategy identified by Beatty-Guenter (1994), the students rated items linked to *transforming the student* most positively, while the items associated with *connecting* students were the lowest rated of the five types. This alternative way of looking at the data serves to reinforce the view that the colleges were doing reasonably well in areas such as motivating students and in the quality of teaching and learning, but that their ability to connect students with the wider institution was an area where they were doing less well (which suggests that course managers need to have more contact with students).

- A major finding was that level 3 students were significantly more likely than those on level 2 courses to give positive ratings on a wide range of items linked to seven out of the nine strategies. It appeared, therefore, that the level of course that students were on was far more important than which college they were from for how they rated the effectiveness of the various strategies (other than college environment and student support). Differences were also found (albeit to a lesser extent) in terms of ethnic background, with Black students more likely than Asian and White students to give positive ratings on 8 out of the 45 items.

4. Identification of implications for improving practice that can be implemented across FE colleges

- Students' experiences of **recruitment and induction** were mixed and, despite general satisfaction with these processes, it appears that opportunities were being missed to enhance student support and better connect them with their institutions: students in both colleges would have liked the opportunity to have met a wider range of college staff during induction, in particular senior college managers; while around a third of students in one college (College B) appeared not to have taken a diagnostic test at the start of their course. It appears that recruitment and induction could therefore be improved by a having a greater focus on activities to connect and support students at the commencement of their courses.

- Students' comments on **course management** indicated that they felt much better connected with their course teachers than with course managers and the college as a whole. This suggests that it may be important for course managers to adopt a wider view of their role (that is, they should consider increasing the amount of contact they have with students) and also that they should have focus on ensuring that students are well integrated into both their course *and* the wider life of the college. Failure to connect students with wider college activities and support services might result in them not accessing support that could prevent them from dropping out.

- What mattered most to students about **motivation** appeared to be factors linked to the *intrinsic motivation* of enjoying learning and succeeding in their chosen course – and these factors were more important than *extrinsic* factors such as financial rewards (EMA) or punitive attendance policies. This suggests that successful strategies to improve retention must have a central focus on ensuring that teaching and learning is of high quality, and also on making sure that students are made aware of the progression opportunities that successful completion of their course will bring.

- From the students' responses it appears that the colleges were more successful in their **communication** about course matters than about college matters. While it would be worrying if this were the other way around, this finding again points to the possibility that there may be a problem of connecting students with the wider institution (and therefore with college-wide support mechanisms). For this reason, colleges may need to review the ways in which they communicate with students to ensure that course and college-level communication are equally effective.

- The items on **teaching and learning** were consistently among the most positively rated by students. However, fewer than 15 per cent of students rated any aspect of teaching and learning as 'excellent', so teaching staff cannot be complacent. These responses echo those given in Martinez and Munday's much larger student survey: 'Students are overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation of teachers and teaching and yet the survey outcomes support the views that improvements are possible in providing more stimulating, interesting and enjoyable learning opportunities' (1998:113).

- **Course assessment**, which was ranked fourth out of the nine strategies for its effectiveness, appears to have been well understood by most students and generally to be operating well. One area for improvement may be in giving students more regular feedback about how they are progressing overall throughout the year (in addition to the feedback on how they have performed on individual assignments).

- An area of concern for Colleges A and B is that items linked to **student support** received some of the lowest ratings for their effectiveness. Many students did comment positively on the support they received from their teachers and on the supporting in using college learning resources (such as the library), but additional learning support services and student advice services were rated relatively poorly. Thus, colleges may need to examine how effective their wider support services are.

- The **college environment** was rated by students as eighth out of the nine strategies, with particularly critical views being expressed on the provision of leisure facilities in which students can socialise and relax. However, this is not simply an issue of recreational spaces (which themselves may be important for connecting students more effectively) but it is also about the quality of the *learning environment*. Just 42 per cent of the students surveyed gave a rating of 'excellent' or 'good' to the item 'An environment in which it is easy to study', which suggests quite strongly that the college environment may have an important bearing on the likelihood of students succeeding and being retained.

- **Quality Assurance** processes were the lowest rated of the nine strategies, with particularly low ratings given for the clarity of complaints procedures, the response by college staff to resolve student complaints and opportunities for students to be involved in decision making. It therefore appears that these colleges could do more to be responsive to the views of students and to be seen to be open to student input and feedback.

- Differences in how students rated the implementation of the different strategies, in particular associated with the level of course and students' ethnic background, suggest that there may be a need for colleges to closely monitor groups who might be considered as being at greater risk of becoming disaffected.

- It is important to bear in mind that these suggestions for improving practice are based upon data from the Business Studies departments in just two colleges.

This study has raised some important issues for the staff in these departments in Colleges A and B, but care must be taken in how much is inferred more widely from these two cases. Nonetheless, these reflections may suggest some *principles* for good practice that could have wider applicability – these will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 5

Findings from Staff Interviews and Lesson Observations

This chapter summarises the findings from interviews with staff in the two colleges and from lesson observations, which were carried out to supplement and contrast with the data collected from students.

Staff Views on the Implementation of Retention Strategies

Previous research into student retention carried out with teaching staff in FE colleges (e.g. Barwuah *et al*, 1997; Spours, 1997) has yielded different explanations about the causes of poor student retention from studies which focussed exclusively on students. For this reason it was important for me to consider what the staff in Colleges A and B thought about the implementation of strategies to improve student retention within their respective colleges. To facilitate direct comparison with the student survey findings reported in the previous chapter I used some of the same questions in eliciting the views of their lecturers (See Appendix 12 and Appendix 13).

The interviews with college staff

A survey of staff views on student retention issues was carried out with a total of 20 staff, 10 from College A and 10 from College B. All 10 of the College A staff were interviewed face-to-face, while 5 staff from College B were interviewed by telephone and 5 completed the survey as a self-completion questionnaire. The survey used for this part of the data collection can be found in Appendix 13.

Overall the staff surveyed in the two colleges were largely similar in terms of gender, age, ethnic background, marital status, whether or not they had children and the levels of course they were teaching/managing. Fifteen out of the 20 staff surveyed were male and 5 were female (College A = 7 male and 3 female; College B = 8 male and 2 female). Most of the staff (16 out of 20) were in the '35 and over' age bracket, with 3 aged 30-34 and 1 choosing not to give their age. Of the 20 staff surveyed, 9 were Black, 5 were Indian, 3 were White, 2 were Pakistani and 1 was Bangladeshi. The ethnic backgrounds of the staff from the two colleges were broadly similar (table 5.1). Thus, like the students they were teaching, the majority of the staff in Colleges A and B were from ethnic minority groups.

Table 5.1: Ethnic backgrounds of staff surveyed in Colleges A and B (n20)

Ethnic background	*College A*	*College B*
Black	5	4
Indian	3	2
White	1	2
Pakistani	0	2
Bangladeshi	1	0
Total	10	10

Nineteen out of the 20 staff surveyed were married and 1 was single, while 17 had children and 3 did not. Most of the staff surveyed (14 out of 20) taught and/or managed students on both level 2 and level 3 courses; 2 taught and/or managed level 2 courses only; 2 taught and/or managed level 3 and level 4 courses; 1 taught and/or managed level 3 courses only; and 1 of those surveyed did not specify. The breakdown of levels of course taught/managed by the staff in each college was quite similar (table 5.2), with the majority of the staff surveyed in each college (7 out of 10 in both cases) teaching/managing level 2 *and* level 3 courses.

Table 5.2: Level(s) of course taught/managed by the staff surveyed (n20)

Courses taught/managed	*College A*	*College B*
level 2 only	2	0
level 2 and level 3	7	7
level 3 only	0	1
level 3 and level 4	1	1
Not stated	0	1
Total	10	10

The fact that the majority of staff surveyed taught both level 2 and 3 students is interesting because, as described in Chapter 4, course level was a major differentiating factor between students in terms of how they rated the implementation of different retention strategies. As most of the teachers are the same for level 2 and 3 Business students in the two colleges, this would suggest that the difference between levels is not because of differences in the teaching staff. Rather, these differences may be down to differences between the types of students at these two levels (in terms of age, maturity, prior educational experiences, etc.) and/or differences in the curriculum, workload, assessment practices and so on. The tendency for students on level 2 courses to be less mature than those at level 3 was reflected in the following comment by a College B teacher: *"My students on level 2 still see themselves as secondary school students...you find some of them still acting immaturely"* BT2).

Staff views on the importance of different strategies

Like the students, the vast majority of the staff surveyed identified all 9 of the retention strategies under investigation as being 'very important' or 'quite important' in helping students to stay and complete their courses.[5] Figure 5.3 shows that student motivation (seen as 'very important' by 18 out of 20 staff) and teaching and learning (seen as 'very important' by 17 out of 20 staff) were seen as being the most important strategies for improving student retention. College environment (seen as 'very important' by just 1 out of 20 staff), support services (seen as 'very important by 3 out of 20 staff) and quality assurance (seen as 'very important' by 5 out of 20 staff) were the three strategies seen, in relative terms, as being the least important for improving student retention.

It is striking that the staff views on the importance of different strategies for improving retention are very similar to those that emerged when the corresponding questions were put to students (see figure 4.1). In each case, the most important factor was identified as being students' motivation, followed by teaching and learning. Induction also featured highly, being rated as the third most important factor by staff and fourth most important by the students. Furthermore, both staff and students placed support services, quality assurance, the college environment and communication in the bottom four (in terms of importance). Thus, there was a significant degree of agreement between staff and students as to which strategies are most/least important for improving retention.

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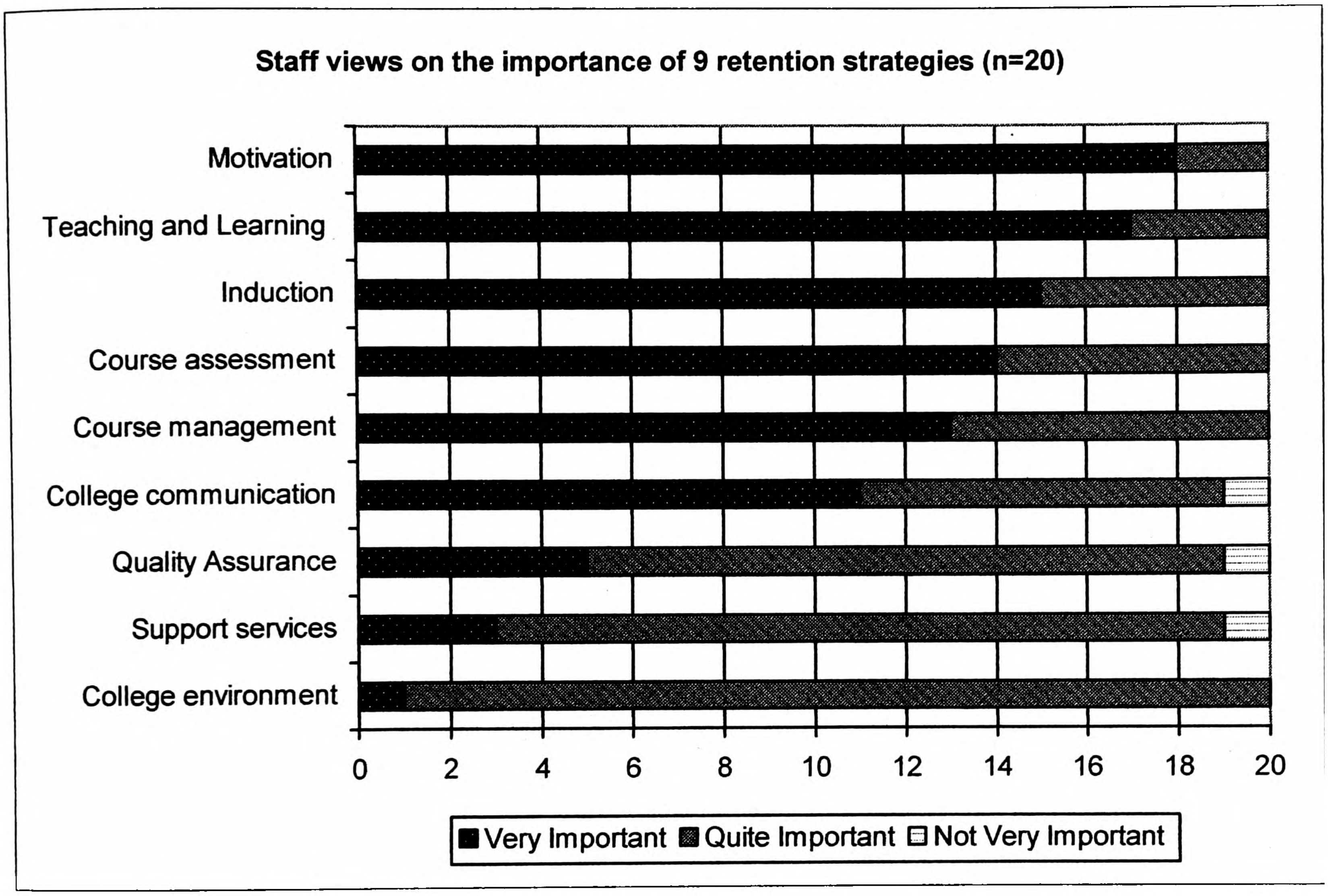
[5] Because of the low number of cases (n20) it was not possible for me to test for statistically significant differences between the staff from the two colleges in terms of the importance they attached to the 9 different retention strategies (as all chi square tests produced cross-tabs in which cells had an expected count of less than 5).

Figure 5.3: Importance attributed by college staff to 9 different strategies



In the previous Chapter I suggested that students may have attached less importance to strategies such as support services, quality assurance and the college environment because they are apparently more remote from their day-to-day classroom experiences. However, one would expect teaching staff to be much more aware of the relevance and importance of such strategies to students' retention and achievement. It is possible that the teaching staff in Colleges A and B were not as well informed about these strategies as perhaps they should have been. Alternatively, it may simply be the case that teachers, like students, see the factors closest to teaching and learning as being most important.

It is important to bear in mind here that we are talking about differences in *relative importance* in the ratings given to the 9 strategies (i.e. focussing on the differences between responses of 'very important' and 'quite important') and that overall both staff and students indicated that they thought that *all* of the strategies are important for improving retention.

Staff views on the implementation of retention strategies

In addition to asking staff to rate the importance of the 9 key retention strategies, they were also asked a series of open questions to probe further on their views on key issues linked to the problem of poor student retention and strategies for improvement.

Reasons for students' choice of course

Seventeen out of the 20 staff surveyed were able to give reasons as to why their students had chosen to do Business Studies. By far the most common reason given as to why students had chosen to study business was because they were seen as wanting careers in business. Fifteen staff gave this as a reason, with comments such as *"Most of them want to own their own business in future"* (AT5). One of the teachers in College A linked this desire to wider community aspirations and expectations, commenting *"most of our students come here to do business courses because* [the Borough] *is dominated by the*

Asian community who are business inclined. Therefore the majority of the business students come on the course to obtain relevant qualifications in order to own or manage their family business" (AT6).

Three of the staff referred to progression on to higher level courses as a reason why students had chosen the course, with one of the teachers in College B saying *"most of my business students are on the course to acquire the necessary qualifications to further their studies in business and to progress to higher education"* (BT9). Other factors seen as influencing the students' choice included the proximity of the colleges to the students' homes and social reasons (such as having friends who were doing the course).

College actions to ensure students are on the right courses

All of the staff interviewed in College A and B recognised the importance of ensuring that students are placed on the right course to begin with. In the words of one College B teacher, *"It is important that you make a good choice of students as this enhances retention. To do this successfully it is important that students have details of the course they are coming on, which we can achieve with effective recruitment and induction, involving people from careers guidance, personal tutors and programme leaders to come and make the students more aware of their choice of course in business"* (BT4). Another College B teacher said *"When a student is on a wrong course, they lose the motivation to continue on that particular course, and their attitude towards the course becomes negative, hence the urge to withdraw"* (BT10).

Eighteen out of the 20 staff surveyed gave their views as to what their college was doing to ensure that students were placed on the right courses. The main policies and practices that staff identified within their college to ensure that students were placed on the right courses were as follows:

- The general college admissions policy or process (mentioned by 12 out of 18 staff);
- Interviews with students (12 staff);
- Advice and guidance (7 staff);
- Diagnostic testing (5 staff);
- Open Days and other recruitment campaigns (4 staff);
- Checking students' qualifications (4 staff);
- Induction (4 staff).

All of the above were mentioned by staff in both colleges. More College A staff mentioned interviews with students (identified by 8 College A staff, 4 College B staff), whereas checking students' qualifications, Open Days and other recruitment campaigns and induction were mentioned more often by College B staff (each of these activities was identified by 3 College B staff, 1 College A staff).

College support for students' learning

Eighteen out of the 20 staff surveyed gave their views on ways in which their college supports students with their learning. The three types of support most commonly identified by staff were: additional learning support (particularly in

English, as well as in Maths and IT), sometimes linked to diagnostic tests (identified by 11 out of 18 staff); tutoring activities, including progress reviews (identified by 9 out of 18 staff); and effective teaching and learning (identified by 8 out of 18 staff). The other factors supporting students with their learning, which were mentioned much less frequently, were provision for supported independent study (identified by 3 staff), financial support in the form of EMA, Individual Learning Plans, appropriate assessment and early feedback (each mentioned by 2 staff), quality assurance processes, college library, equal opportunities policy, responding to student feedback and college monitoring systems (each mentioned by just one of the staff interviewed).

In relation to assessment, one of the College B staff observed that *"students are given diagnostic assessments as a way of identifying their strengths and weaknesses on the course. If a student is diagnosed as being below the entry criteria, then that student is automatically transferred or put on a lower level course and in this way, you still retain the students"* (BT6). Another College B tutor said that financial support such as EMA had helped retention because *"no matter how much they hate to coming to lessons, they turn up because they know that without attending a lesson their EMA form is not authorised. This has improved attendance"* (BT3). However, while EMA might be a powerful incentive for some students to attend, it may also create new difficulties for teachers who have to then try and teach students who do not have a strong interest in being there and may even "hate" coming to lessons.

Students' connectedness to course tutors and the college

All of the staff interviewed indicated that they thought that students were well connected to their course tutors and the college generally, although those that elaborated focussed much more upon student connectedness to their teachers than to the college generally. This emphasis was reflected in comments such as *"tutors are always there to support students"* (BT2) and *"The staff are accessible and very supportive to all students"* (AT8). The connectedness of the tutors to students can be very important in helping to ensure that support needs are identified and students get the help they need before they drop out.

One College A teacher said that supporting students on a course can be particularly important for improving the retention of students with language barriers. She described the case of a student who wanted to leave a course because of the difficulties they were having with their English. The student was referred to an additional learning support unit to be assessed. Support was quickly put in place for this student, in the form of extra English lessons, and within two weeks the student became very motivated, contributed much more to the lessons and was able to do her course work. This student has since made a successful progression to Higher Education and is currently studying law at university. Such success stories may, however, be the exception rather than the rule, judging by the relatively low importance tutors and students attached to student support in the two colleges.

Course organisation

Amongst the staff in both colleges there was a feeling that their courses are well organised, although in each college there were some more equivocal comments such as *"It depends. Sometimes it's well organised. Sometimes it's disorganised, especially timetable changes"* (AT5); and *"Well organised, although it could be better with good management"* (BT8). I asked one of the staff in College A what she thought 'good management' entails, and she replied by saying *"Good management requires skills in planning, organising, co-ordinating and motivating both the students and staff. How can you have managers that are remote from the students and staff? These qualities are lacking in our entire college"* (AT2). Thus, in some quarters at any rate, it was not only the students who felt far-removed from college managers. This is clearly a serious issue from the point of view of implementing retention strategies. As pointed out by Davies (1999), staff-staff communication is as every bit as important as staff-student communication for the effective implementation of strategies.

Ability of teachers to motivate students to do well on their course

All the staff interviewed indicated that they thought that most or all of their course colleagues were highly successful at motivating students to do well. Comments centred upon the dedication and commitment of teachers to their students' success, for example: *"Students are our priority and therefore requiring our daily commitment to their needs... level 2 students require a lot of attention and we must be there to provide it for them to cope"* (AT7);

"Teachers are always there for the students" (BT1); *"Teachers are committed to student retention, achievement and success"* (BT4).

There was also a strong emphasis from the staff on the importance of good teaching and learning and learning support in ensuring that students were motivated to do well, for example: *"Effective teaching and learning taking place. Extra help with coursework. Good use of teaching strategies, eg. group work, feedback on achievement. Good learning materials, eg. handouts"* (AT6); *"All course tutors are required to give extra support to students in terms of one to one support, tutorial activities, use of additional support and regular feedback to students"* (AT4); *"Most teachers can be very motivating in giving extra support, excellent teaching, good feedback to students"* (BT10).

The commitment of the teachers to their students also came through as a strong theme in the teachers' comments. For example, a teacher from College A said:

> *"I have to impress my students by using good classroom strategies to ensure that successful teaching and learning take place. Students call me the best teacher in the world because I try not to let them down in my lessons. They come out of my lesson and feel that they have learnt. As teachers we should all maintain this to boost retention and achievement. However, to be a good teacher, you must be willing to face stress"* (AT8)

Another teacher, this time from College B, also articulated their sense of professional responsibility to students: *"We are paid to help them achieve, therefore we need to motivate them to achieve. Students are assets to the college, without them there is no college. Therefore, to retain them effective teaching and learning has to improve for the best and for their motivation"* (BT5). Quality assurance processes were also an important consideration for teachers, particularly the desire to do well in lesson observations and inspection. For example, a college A teacher said *"We have to do well in teaching and learning. The College quality system is very thorough with continuous classroom observation and with an emphasis on all teachers to obtain a teaching qualification, which has improved our teaching and learning and teachers now aspire for grades 1 and 2"* (AT2).

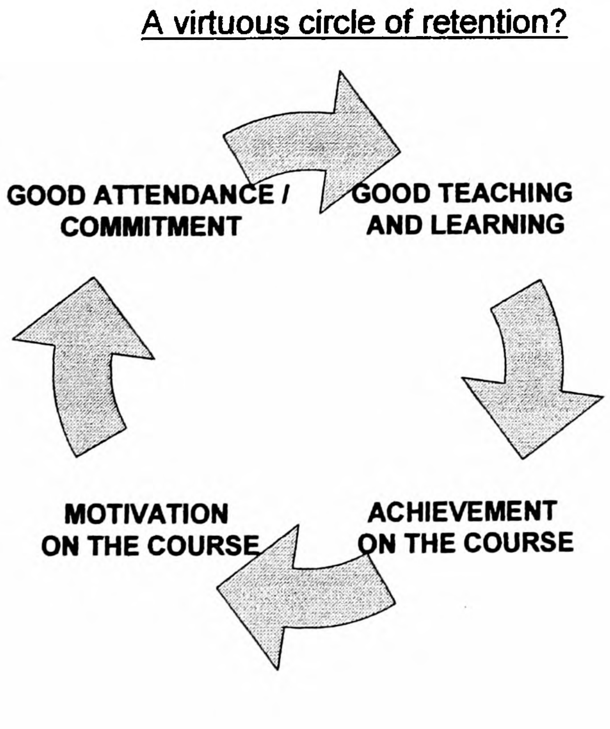
Experience of students 'at risk' of not completing their course

All bar two of the 20 staff interviewed said that there had been a time (or times) when they thought that a student would not complete a course. When asked a why they had thought this, the most typical response from the staff surveyed was to point to *symptoms* of 'at risk' behaviour, such as poor attendance, poor performance/achievement, disruptive behaviour, low motivation/confidence and lack of interest in the course. However, a small number of those surveyed went beyond the symptoms of students 'at risk' of dropping out and pinpointed *causes related to students' lives outside college* (e.g. change of circumstances such as pregnancy or finding work, or personal problems) or to *problems internal to the college* (such as students being placed on inappropriate courses or problems with the structure of the course).

Views on students' reasons for completing courses

In response to the question 'What is your view as to why a student may decide to stay and complete a course?', the most frequently occurring responses highlighted good teaching and learning, student motivation, good attendance and student achievement. As one teacher in College A commented, *"You need good teaching and learning taking place and then student motivation will follow, particularly when they are progressing on the course"* (AT3). The key point about such responses is that pointed to a *process* of mutually reinforcing factors. In other words, there is no single strategy that teachers or college managers can put in place, but rather a series of related actions need to occur for students to be retained. Thinking about these staff responses made me think that it was possible to think of the issue in terms of a *virtuous circle of retention* (shown in figure 5.4):

Figure 5.4: Key elements identified by staff for supporting student retention


A virtuous circle of retention?
GOOD ATTENDANCE / COMMITMENT
GOOD TEACHING AND LEARNING
ACHIEVEMENT ON THE COURSE
MOTIVATION ON THE COURSE

Other factors mentioned by staff included the importance of the course aiding progression on to their chosen career or further qualifications, the absence of *"external/internal pressure hindering performance"* (BT3), having a well structured course with clear aims and objectives, and satisfaction with the wider college environment as well as the course. A teacher in College A elaborated on the importance of course aims and objectives by saying *"a course without clear aims and objectives yields nothing but poor retention as students and staff would be lost without knowing what they have to do. And also a course without a structure to work on can be disastrous and can be off-putting to students"* (AT8).

Views on what more course teachers could do to help improve retention

The most common response about what more teachers could do to help improve retention (given by 15 out of 19 staff) was to call for more and better support and encouragement for students. However, because of the time pressures that most staff were under, this was acknowledged by two respondents to be difficult in practice: *"Commitment and extra support, although with the time factor it becomes difficult"* (AT4); *"Give extra support to students. However, this requires time and money"* (BT5).

Seven out of 19 staff said that they thought that attendance monitoring systems could be improved so that 'at risk' students could be identified earlier and the same number stressed the importance of effective teaching and learning. Four out of 19 staff thought that retention would be improved by better course recruitment and induction activities. Other factors that were mentioned were: having appropriately qualified teachers; better course management; having more teachers; staff development; improved discipline and implementation of withdrawal policies; and quality assurance processes to support teaching and learning.

Views on what more the college could do to help improve retention

Staff responses on what more their college could do to help improve retention covered all 9 of the key retention strategies being considered in this thesis, with particular emphasis placed upon improving support (especially financial support) for students and better course management. In addition the staff surveyed came up with a number of other suggestions through which they believed their colleges could improve student retention. These were:

- Better student recruitment (e.g. *"Ensure right course is chosen"* – BT8);
- Having more teachers who are specialists in business;
- Having more permanent staff;
- Reviewing the college retention policy;
- Employing more teachers;
- Regular review of attendance policy;
- Monitoring of 'at risk students';
- More support for lecturers;
- Greater partnership with parents/guardians;

The interviews with staff, as with my interviews with students, touched upon all nine of the retention strategies I am investigating. These interviews served to reinforce the importance of teaching and learning as a pivotal strategy among the nine being considered, which I believed made it all the more important that I observed teaching and learning as part of this investigation. It is to the classroom observations that I will now turn.

Findings from Lesson Observations

Given the importance of effective teaching and learning as a strategy for improving retention, as suggested by the literature (Davies, 1999; Martinez, 2001; NATFHE, 2000; National Audit Office, 2002) and also by the students and staff I had surveyed in Colleges A and B, I decided that it was important to look directly at teaching and learning in the two colleges. This was done through observing ten Business Studies lessons, five each in College A and College B. These were a mix of level 2 and level 3 groups – I observed three level 3 classes and two level 2 classes in each college. In order to follow a structured and impartial approach to appraising each of the observed lessons I used the FENTO observation schedule, grading key areas and the lesson as a whole (as either 'very good', 'good', 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory'), noting down general comments and issues to be addressed. A sample observation sheet is shown in Appendix 9.

Lessons observed in College A

The five Business Studies lessons observed in College A consisted of three level 3 classes and two level 2 classes. Based upon the FENTO criteria I assessed the three level 3 classes as all being 'very good' overall and the two level 2 classes as 'good'.

Strengths of the teaching and learning observed in College A

The main strengths of the teaching and learning observed in these five lessons can be summarised as:

- good lesson plan with clear aims and objectives addressed during the lesson (for example, clear connections were made between the lesson objectives and the specifications within the assessment criteria, throughout the lesson);
- excellent awareness of learners' needs (for example, one of the learners needed more information in order to complete a task in the class. The teacher was able to provide this information with extra handouts and one-to-one support as she explained to the student. The student seem very motivated and was able to complete the task effectively);
- good classroom management (for example, effectively challenging lateness. In one lesson a student arrived 16 minutes late to the lesson and was issued with a late slip. Afterwards the teachers explained to me that *"Late slips are used as part of the college's retention policy to challenge student lateness and this is sent to the Learning Advisers*

who would action it by either writing to the student's parent or issue them with a progress review form to take to all lesson, which the students don't like doing". He added that this has helped to improve attendance and retention as students who fail to comply are not given EMA);

- full participation of learners;
- use of a range of teaching materials;
- motivating learners by involving them in all aspects of the lesson (the teachers managed their classes well and generally had a good rapport with their students – one student said during the class *"Miss you are the best teacher in the world. I like coming to your lesson because I learn a lot"*);
- lesson delivered at the learners' own pace (for example, in one class the teacher took the time to clarify subject specific terms in order to increase student's confidence in discussing the subject matter);
- good assessment of learning outcomes with the students;
- effective use of ICT at the learners' level;
- good differentiation in the teaching.

Weaknesses of the teaching and learning observed in College A

The main areas in which the learning and teaching could have been improved upon were:

- in one class the teacher could have given more feedback to students;

- scope for greater differentiation between learning and assessment activities, which could have been achieved by making more use of case studies;
- classroom seating arrangements could have been better managed to suit learners' needs in group work activities;
- classroom control could have been better;
- learners needed to be stretched more in group work;
- more could have been done to support the learners during the lesson.

In one lesson I observed there were problems due to faulty equipment, which wasted valuable lesson time. During this lesson the teacher wanted to use an overhead projector, but the only one in the room was not functioning. One of the students commented *"Not again!"*. The teacher went into the next-door classroom to fetch another projector, saying *"I am sick of this college with OHPs not functioning in the class"*. While there clearly was a problem with the resources here, it seemed to me as an observer that my colleague's planning could have been better on this occasion (in that they should have checked whether the projector was working before the lesson began).

Overall, the strengths of the teaching observed in the College A classes were much in evidence in both the level 3 and level 2 classes, whereas the areas where the teaching and learning could have been improved where mainly confined to the two level 2 groups.

Lessons observed in College B

The five Business Studies lessons observed in College B also consisted of three level 3 classes and two level 2 classes. Using the FENTO criteria, I found the three level 3 classes in College B more mixed than those observed in College A – one was evaluated as being 'very good', one as 'good' and the third as 'satisfactory'. Meanwhile the two level 2 classes were assessed as being 'very good' and 'good' respectively.

Strengths of the teaching and learning observed in College A

The main strengths of the teaching and learning in the five lessons observed in College B were:

- aims and objectives of the lesson clearly defined to learners and fully addressed;
- learners actively involved in the lesson through a variety of activities which differentiated the lesson (in one lesson, which was examining the different types of 'stakeholders', the teacher used Tottenham Hotspur Football Club as an example which was very effective in engaging the students, starting a constructive discussion about football fans as a class of stakeholder);
- good feedback to learners (for example, use of formative and informative assessment, with constructive feedback given at the end of students' presentations);
- use of a range of teaching and learning materials;
- good use of ICT;
- good use of questioning by the lecturer;

- teacher was clearly very well prepared;
- very good rapport between teacher and students (for example, in one class the teacher cracked a joke from time to time, which the students enjoyed, but their concentration quickly returned to the lesson)

After one class I spoke to the teacher about her approach to teaching and how she felt the lesson had gone. She answered:

> *'This is me. I cannot teach without making them laugh. This is how they learn and remember my lesson. More so as today's lesson was centred on a football club - it was meant to trigger off jokes and arguments. Good lesson indeed"*

The approach certainly seemed to have worked with the students, as I heard one say to the teacher *"I attend your lesson because it is full of jokes which keeps me cheerful. I hate a boring lesson without a joke"*, and another said at the end *"what an entertaining class that keeps me going even though the subject seems tough".*

Weaknesses of the teaching and learning observed in College A

The main areas in which the learning and teaching could have been improved upon were:

- learning and teaching would have been helped by having a better classroom environment (not suitable for a large class);

- could have benefited from greater to differentiation to support all learners;
- weak management and development of the learning process;
- a firmer approach was required to handle a disruptive class;
- learners could have been more actively engaged in a wider variety of activities;
- group work could have been improved to ensure the full participation of all students;
- attendance and punctuality could have been improved (for example only 9 out of 25 students were punctual to one lesson. Although the teacher asked the latecomers to write down on a blank sheet of paper their reasons for being late to the lesson, I felt that this lateness could have been more effectively challenged).

In the class where most of the students arrived late I asked the teacher afterwards why he had not issued late slips to them. He said:

> *"I am tired of talking to this group about their lateness to lessons. Yes, we do have a system of chasing lateness and attendance, but it needs firming up by the management. I can only do my best but effective implementation is the answer to your question"*

Thus, although I had set out to observe teaching and learning, in this instance I witnessed how other college strategies and procedures could impinge on what the teacher does in the classroom.

Summary of lesson observations

The teaching and learning I observed in the 10 Business classes in Colleges A and B was mostly of a good standard, with the aims and objectives of each lesson generally explained clearly and also met. Lessons were reasonably varied, which helped to engage learners and motivate them. And most of the teachers demonstrated effective differentiation in order to be able to meet their students' learning needs. The overall grades for each lesson, using the FENTO framework, are summarised in table 5.5.

Table 5.5: Evaluations of 10 Business Studies lessons observed

Overall Rating	**College A**		**College B**		**Total**
	level 2	*level 3*	*level 2*	*level 3*	
'Very Good'	-	✗✗✗	✗	✗	5
'Good'	✗✗	-	✗	✗	4
'Satisfactory'	-	-	-	✗	1
'Unsatisfactory'	-	-	-	-	0

Out of 10 lessons observed, I judged 5 to be 'very good', 4 to be 'good' and 1 'satisfactory', with no 'unsatisfactory' lessons observed.

For me as an observer the lessons observed in the two colleges were well planned sessions, using sound group profiles which effectively identified learners' needs. The planning incorporated clearly stated aims and objectives for most of the lessons, with links made to prior and future learning. The teachers I observed thus put into practice the following key elements of planning identified by Reece and Walker;

> *'You will need to plan an introduction, development and a conclusion within the time available, give students an experience, make them reflect on the experience and provide variety for them so that they are motivated throughout the session'*
>
> (Reece & Walker, 2003:22)

In terms of classroom management, which was one of the FENTO criteria, the teachers demonstrated effective classroom management, ensuring a conducive working environment, for example students desks were properly arranged to suit the group work done in the classes. Also, the majority of the teachers were able to group students in sets to differentiate the lessons and to meet their individual needs. I felt that this was very effective, particularly with the use of extended tasks for active students, while weaker students were given tasks that they could handle. Using different learning styles was encouraged in these lessons with variety of teaching styles and materials that incorporated use of IT facilities such as smartboard and visual aids, as recommended by Martinez (2000).

The sample of lessons observed was admittedly small and, if anything, perhaps paints a more positive picture of teaching and learning than that reported by the students (see figure 4.6 in chapter 4). While 9 out of the 10 lessons I observed where rated as 'very good' or 'good', only between 50% and 60% of the students surveyed rated the 5 items on teaching and learning as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, with approximately one third of students rating these items as ‘satisfactory’ and a minority (approximately 10-15%) giving ratings of ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.

It is easy to see how each of the areas in which the observed learning and teaching exhibited problems, if these were a persistent feature of the teaching and learning, could lead to students becoming disengaged from their learning, thereby putting them at risk of dropping out. In particular, lessons were observed in both of the colleges in which the teachers could have differentiated more in order to meet the needs of all of their students. And there were two lessons (one in each college) in which the control of the classroom could have been more effective. Thus, while the overall quality of the lessons observed was good (and it is possible that my presence as an observer may have had a distorting effect on what I witnessed), there is no room for complacency.

Interestingly the level 3 classes I observed were generally better than the level 2 classes (4 out of the 6 level 3 classes were judged to be ‘very good’, whereas 3 of the 4 level 2 classes were rated just as ‘good’). Although care has to be taken in making any inferences from such a small number of observations, this difference is consistent with the significantly greater levels of satisfaction expressed by level 3 than level 2 students, as outlined in the previous chapter.

Summary

Drawing together the data from my interviews with teaching staff and the classroom observations in College A and College B, I will now summarise what these add to the student data in terms of answering my thesis research questions (2 to 4).

2. Examination of student and staff perceptions of 9 key retention strategies

- Like the students surveyed, the 20 staff in College A and B saw all nine of the retention strategies under investigation as being important. Staff expressed strikingly similar views to students in terms of which of the strategies they regarded as being most and least important.

- Student **motivation** and **teaching and learning** were seen as being the most important strategies for improving student retention. Meanwhile, the **college environment**, **student support** and **quality assurance** were the three strategies seen by staff as being the least important for improving student retention (in relative terms).

- Teachers were very clear about the importance of the **recruitment and induction** phase for ensuring that students are placed on the right course to begin with.

- Additional learning support, tutoring and effective teaching and learning were seen by staff as the principal ways in which the colleges **support** students with their learning.

- It was pointed out that **financial support** through the EMA could be something of a 'double-edged sword' in relation to student retention, in that it was highly effective for ensuring student attendance but, on the other hand, could be disruptive to **teaching and learning** if a minority of students are only attending for the EMA.

- **Teaching and learning** was seen as being of central importance in ensuring students' **motivation**. It was acknowledged that it could be harder to motivate level 2 than level 3 students.

- Motivation, attendance/commitment, good quality teaching and learning and student achievement can be seen as being part of a **virtuous cycle of retention** - each of these factors are mutually reinforcing and important for encouraging student retention and success.

3. Investigation into how effectively these strategies are being implemented

- The teachers interviewed believed that they were very successful at **'connecting'** with their students, but (like the students) they questioned how well connected college managers were to students. Worryingly, there was also a suggestion in College A that college managers were also remote from the teaching staff.

- **Course management** was generally seen to be effective but, as was also identified by students, timetabling and resources were highlighted as problems.

- The major area in which teachers thought more could be done to improve student retention was in relation to **student support**, although the staff surveyed also noted the difficulties they faced in providing this support themselves because of the pressures of time and resource constraints.

- Staff also identified **attendance monitoring systems** as an area that could be strengthened to improve the monitoring of students deemed to be 'at risk' of dropping out.

- While the overall **quality of the lessons** observed was good, there were more problems with the level 2 groups than the level 3 groups.

4. Identification of implications for improving practice that can be implemented across FE colleges

- A recommendation that is specific to Colleges A and B is that managers in both of these colleges should investigate further the reasons why their teaching staff tended to see student support, the college environment and quality assurance as being less important than other strategies for improving student retention.

- College managers need to be well connected to *both* students and teaching staff in order for college strategies to operate effectively.

- Colleges should examine whether differences observed here between the quality of teaching and learning between levels 2 and 3 is more widespread.

In the concluding chapter I will consider the staff and student data together, drawing out wider implications from this study as a whole.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Strategies for Improving Retention in FE

The problem of student drop-out in FE

Retention rates for long courses in FE colleges recently stood at approximately 80 per cent (LSC, 2003a). Overall, for the middle 80 per cent of colleges, retention rates in 2003/4 lay in the range 78 per cent to 91 per cent (Rammell, 2006). Thus, in most FE colleges nationally, somewhere between one in five and one in ten students who started courses did not complete them. Although academic researchers have historically paid greater attention to student retention in the HE sector, developments within FE over the last 15 years have increasingly focussed the attention of colleges and their staff on retention issues (Hemsley-Brown, 2002). Since 1992, when the newly-incorporated FE colleges moved to a system of national funding under the FEFC, there has been a steadily increasing focus on colleges' performance against national benchmarks and key performance indicators – with a particular emphasis on retention and achievement rates. More recent moves towards greater self-assessment and self-improvement by colleges (DfES, 2006; Foster, 2005; LSC, 2003b & 2005a; QIA, 2007) have continued and intensified this trend. More than ever before, colleges are under great pressure to pay attention to rates of student retention and to implement strategies to minimise student withdrawal. On the face of it this appears to be a very positive development for students, who have a right to expect that colleges will make every effort to ensure they stay and successfully complete their courses – although I will return to question this assumption later in this chapter.

From my review of the literature on the causes of student retention it can be concluded that student drop-out is a complex and multi-causal phenomenon. While it is possible to identify the main factors that have been linked with poor student retention – associated with the characteristics of students (age, gender and ethnicity), their experiences in making the transition from school to college, the type of course and qualification which they are doing, the quality of teaching and learning, students' levels of commitment and motivation, and financial pressures – it has not been possible, as Tinto had once hoped, to arrive at a 'predictive theory of drop-out' (Tinto, 1975:94). What can confidently be stated is that there are a wide range of factors associated with non-completion, and these are likely to interact and combine. From the point of view of developing strategies for improving student retention, this suggests that any such strategies must address factors that are both internal and external to colleges.

Strategies currently used to promote retention in FE colleges

I identified nine main types of strategy that are used to promote student retention in FE based on my literature review and exploratory interviews in College A. These strategies were student recruitment and induction, course management, student motivation, communication, teaching and learning, course assessment, student support, the college environment and quality assurance. In Chapter 2 I examined each of these strategies in turn, setting out the main ways in which each has been linked to student retention and providing examples of the sorts of practical measures that can be taken to effectively implement these strategies. Drawing on the work of Beatty-Guenter, I also showed how it is possible to classify these nine types of retention strategy differently, according to the types of *processes* involved. Thus, Beatty-Guenter's typology conceptualises retention strategies according to whether they are focussed on *sorting, supporting, connecting* or *transforming.* It is helpful to look at the problem in these two different ways, the first practically oriented towards areas of college activities (induction, teaching and learning, assessment, quality assurance, etc.) and the latter focussed on the actual processes by which colleges and their staff engage with students.

Whether approached in terms of the nine types of retention strategy (which I adopted as my main lens on the issue) or Beatty-Guenter's more process-oriented categories, it was clear from my review of college documentation and early interviews with staff that all of these strategies were in operation in College A and B. The main question for my empirical research, then, was to ask how effectively the nine strategies were being implemented in the Business departments of the two colleges.

Key Findings and Implications for Improving Practice in FE

The preceding two chapters, which presented the data gathered from student surveys and interviews (Chapter 4) and staff interviews and classroom observations of teaching and learning (Chapter 5), each concluded with a summary of key findings and an initial identification of implications for improving practice across FE colleges. I will now bring these together and summarise the main implications in relation to the nine retention strategies, before considering some wider implications and principles for effective implementation of retention strategies.

Nine retention strategies: findings and implications

Recruitment and induction

The staff interviewed for this study saw the process of student recruitment as of fundamental importance among the strategies for improving student retention, echoing the recommendations of previous research (for example, Barwuah *et al*, 1997; Goodhew, 2002; McGivney, 1996a:120; Morgan, 2001:13; National Audit Office, 2002; Yorke & Longden, 2004:123). As one of the teachers interviewed put it, *"When a student is on a wrong course, they lose the motivation to continue on that particular course, and their attitude towards the course becomes negative, hence the urge to withdraw"*. However, the student survey and interviews found that students had mixed views about how much their colleges had done to ensure that they were on the most appropriate course. At the very least, then, it appears that College A and B could do more to ensure that their processes for ensuring students are effectively screened, 'sorted' and placed on the right course are implemented more consistently.

Induction was rated by students as the fourth most important strategy in ensuring their retention, with 62 per cent rating it as 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course (figure 4.1). Staff rated induction as the third most important strategy for ensuring students' retention (figure 5.3). The relatively high importance attached by the staff and students to induction is consistent with the conclusions of Yorke & Longden (2004), Martinez (2001), Tresman (2002) and Tinto (1975; 1982), all of whom concluded that induction has an important impact on student retention.

Overall, students' rated induction as the third most effectively implemented of the nine strategies (figure 4.13). It therefore appears that both colleges had reasonably effective induction processes in place, although a minority of students gave negative views and there were few strongly positive accounts given of induction. The most highly rated aspects of induction were receiving information about college learning resources and having the content and requirements of the course clearly explained, but less than half of the students surveyed positively evaluated their induction in terms of having the opportunity to meet a range of staff and receiving information about college support services (figure 4.4).

As an insider in College A I knew that induction took place at the beginning of the academic year, during the first week of courses, but that this was not repeated for students joining level 2 programmes at the beginning of the subsequent second, third or fourth semesters. Thus, new students are recruited for every six week semester and were allowed to join the class in the middle of the academic year, but these students do not receive an induction to the college. When these students were interviewed, they had very little idea about the induction or how they might have benefited from having been properly inducted. In College A this system clearly had an impact on the effectiveness of induction as a retention strategy. One of my recommendations to the FMT team was for the team to induct all new students regardless of the period when they joined the course. This recommendation was taken on board and since then there has been an improvement in the induction of level 2 students. Anecdotal evidence, in the form of feedback from colleagues at FMT meetings, suggests that this has helped to improve attendance and retention as these students are now clearer about the requirements and expectations of their course.

In short, while students appeared broadly satisfied with the induction process, there is clearly some room for improvement in College A and B. The key to induction starts with the recruitment process and making sure that students are admitted onto suitable courses and those who are not suited to a particular course are filtered out and referred to other more appropriate courses within the college or elsewhere. These would include those with inappropriate qualifications, course aspirations, travelling difficulties or social and domestic arrangements which would make it difficult for them to attend regularly. This process has to work in concert with the college's marketing department and admissions team. Likewise progression routes should also be discussed at the point of induction, as some students will be thinking ahead to a particular line or path of study.

Secondly, working with other support departments as appropriate, diagnostic tests in literacy and numeracy have to be in place and available during induction, with quick feedback on the results of those tests available before teaching starts. These tests have to be understandable to those who administer them and the results and outcomes simple to explain and implement. Failure to effectively diagnose additional learning support needs early on increases the risk that some students will struggle without the support they need and therefore may become demotivated and more likely to drop out. It seems likely that better co-ordination between different elements of the colleges – involving teachers, managers, additional learning support staff, wider support services and senior managers – would be more likely to be achieved if induction were approached as a process rather than as a one-off event, as recommended by Martinez & Munday (1998) and FEDA (1999). Thus, colleges could introduce induction phases that are akin to the 'freshers' weeks' in HE.

Course management

Students indicated that course management was the third most important factor for ensuring their retention (65 per cent of the second cohort surveyed described it as 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course – figure 4.1). Course management was ranked fourth out of the nine strategies for effectiveness of implementation (figure 4.13).

The aspects of course management that students regarded as being most effectively implemented were in relation to the overall organisation of their course and the accessibility and approachability of college staff (figure 4.5). However, it was clear from the interviews with students in both colleges that they felt much more closely connected to their course teachers than to the wider college and its management. 'Opportunities to have a say in how the course is run' was the lowest ranked of the items on course management, rated as 'excellent' or 'good' by just 38 per cent of the students in the second cohort. Moreover relatively low ratings were given by students to the speed and fairness with which staff dealt with their problems.

These findings seem to suggest that in both colleges there was a gap between the students and those managing their courses. The very fact that course management was regarded by students as being more important than six of the other retention strategies, including course assessment and support services, may be an indication of their awareness that there was a gap here. However, it is interesting to consider what is most important to students in the management of their course. Course management, seen from the point of view of the college and its staff, combines the rigours of curriculum management, timetabling, staffing, rooming and general resource management. But the aspect on which students most frequently commented in interviews related to the inconsistency of teaching staff and timetables. Thus students' views of the management of their course appear to be strongly influenced by the efficiency with which the most basic and immediate aspects of course management were met (that is, being taught by the teacher they were expecting in the classroom that had been designated) – a finding that would support the view of Prescott and Simpson (2004) that certain 'hygiene' factors must first be addressed before students can become highly motivated learners.

The work of Martinez and Munday (1998) stresses the importance of wider aspects of course management in ensuring student retention, focussing in particular on curriculum design and delivery to ensure that teaching and learning meets the needs of students. McGivney (1994) also picked up on the importance of curriculum design, arguing that it should be relevant to students' 'learning agendas', that is designed to take account of their needs and expectations. Curriculum design encompasses more than simply the structure for teaching the core subject area, but also involves developing study skills (Yorke, 2002) and building in time for students to consolidate their learning (Goodhew, 2002). Other commentators have called for curriculum design to take greater account of the ways in which students learn, e.g. Mason (1989) argues that colleges should be sensitive to newer models of student learning, which 'may involve designing non-standard courses for non-standard entrants' (1989:38).

Motivation

Motivation emerged as a highly significant retention strategy in this research. As shown in figure 4.1, four out of five students surveyed described motivation as 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course. Not only was motivation regarded as the most important strategy by students, but it was also seen as being the most effectively implemented of the nine strategies (figure 4.13). Moreover, the staff interviewed also rated motivation most highly among the nine strategies (figure 5.3). The emphasis placed upon motivation by the students and staff in Colleges A and B is supported by the research of Martinez (1997, 2000), Barwuah *et al* (1997), Thorpe (1991) and Miller (1990), all of which highlighted the importance of motivation as a causal factor in student retention.

It is important to note that some motivation factors were more important than others. Among the five items on motivation, the factor which students rated most highly was achieving the qualification at the end of the course, followed by the motivation generated by students' interest in the course. As shown in figure 4.6, financial support (e.g. EMA) and college rules on attendance were seen by students as less important sources of motivation than their desire to achieve the qualification and learn about business. This was reinforced in the qualitative interviews with students, which found that these were the major reasons for wanting to do a business course in the first place. The students' views on the importance of motivation were also supported by the staff interviewed, who regarded students achievement on the course was a key component in creating what I have suggested may be a 'virtuous cycle' of retention.

Communication

Communication was rated by students as sixth most important of the nine strategies (figure 4.1) and it was also placed sixth in importance by the staff interviewed (figure 5.3). It was also ranked sixth by students in terms of the effectiveness of its implementation (figure 4.13). There were two items linked to communication which the students surveyed saw as being less effectively implemented than the others – these were 'Giving you information about college matters' and 'Informing you about any changes in the course' (figure 4.7). While communication about course matters was generally viewed positively, some students expressed the view that there could be greater student involvement in decision-making and there was some discontent expressed about finding out about course changes at short notice.

Thus there was some evidence that communication in the two colleges was not as effective as it could be. In considering this finding it is important to bear in mind that that there several different aspects to college communication. There is the internal communication between staff/student and manager/staff and external communication involving staff/parents/guardians and college/external stakeholders. Of concern to the colleges in this survey are the internal discourse between the college, staff and the students. The staff have to have a clear understanding of what is expected from them and of them by management. Once this is clear, whether for teaching staff, support staff and general ancillary personnel, they will be better able to communicate effectively to students and parents.

Another important aspect of communication is student participation and involvement in decision making. Student reps, by virtue of their role, are similar to staff in that they need to clearly understand the directives passed down by the college. They need to be kept informed at an early stage. But it is also crucial that they, and their fellow students whose views they are there to represent, feel that the students have a voice that is listened to by the college management. At a practical level it is important that student reps are kept informed about any printed and written documents which may need to be circulated. Basic misunderstandings can be avoided and prevented and suggestions made about improving presentations and printed displays. Induction is clearly also an important opportunity for effective communication within a college.

One way of looking at communication is provided by Francis (1987), who distinguishes between four different purposes of communication: 'communicating for sharing the compelling vision'; 'communicating for integrating the effort'; 'communication for sustaining a healthy community'; and 'communication for making intelligent decisions'. In the context of business courses within an FE college, 'communicating for sharing the compelling vision' has relevance to several aspects of retention strategies, e.g. giving guidance to students to ensure they are choosing the right course, motivating them with the vision of completing the course, achieving the qualification and progressing to the next level. 'Communicating for integrating the effort' would here refer to more short-term communication matters to do with course assessment requirements and expectations, acceptable behaviour policy and complying to college rules and regulations and feedback on students' performance (including feedback to parents). Thirdly, 'communication for sustaining a healthy community' refers to processes connecting students with the institution (Beatty-Guenter, 1994) and student involvement in all aspects of the course and college life – and so therefore is also about integration into this community (Tinto, 1975). Finally, 'communication for making intelligent decisions' can be linked to more practical aspects, e.g. effective course organisation such as giving sufficient notice to students of changes in staffing and timetabling. Thus, we can see that communication actually cuts across a number of other strategies for improving student retention and for this reason may actually be more important than it at first sight appears.

Teaching and Learning

As Morgan (2001) indicates, the research literature on student retention makes a good deal of reference to students' perceptions of teaching as being an important influence on their decision to stay or withdraw from a particular course. It therefore follows that improving the quality of teaching and learning should have an impact on retention rates (Henderson, 2003; Martinez, 2001; NAO, 2002; Ogunleye, 2000; and Yorke, 2002). The findings of this survey confirms this as students also regarded teaching as being very important for improving retention.

Teaching and Learning, as shown in figure 4.1, was rated by students as being the second most important strategy in ensuring their retention – 74 per cent described it as being very important. In terms of how effectively teaching and learning was actually implemented (figure 4.13) it emerged as the second most highly strategy. Staff placed a similarly high importance on teaching and learning as a factor for improving retention (figure 5.3).

Although students in both colleges were not universally positive about their teachers, by and large they viewed the teaching and learning as effective. The different aspects of teaching and learning which I asked students about – looking at how well teachers relate to students, how good they are at encouraging students to participate fully in lessons, their ability to take control of lessons, make classes varied and interesting and vary the teaching style – were all given roughly equal ratings by the students. Thus, there were no particular aspects of teaching and learning which stood out as being particularly well or poorly implemented. Within the research literature on retention and teaching and learning there has been a particularly strong emphasis on the importance of variety in teaching and on enabling students to 'learn to learn' (e.g. Martinez, 1997a; Sorrell, 2002), and importance has also been placed upon giving personal attention to students (Smith & Bailey, 1993) and effective planning (Pupynin & Crowder, 1995; Munn *et al*, 1992; York & Longden, 2004).

While there was room for improvement on each of these aspects of teaching and learning, the main difficulties in this area appear to have been structural, in that they were tied up with issues of course management, assessment and deployment of staff (discussed below). In particular in College A there were problems with the timetabling being subject to change at short notice. Inevitably changes in the timetable, particularly where these also involve changes in teaching staff, create difficulties for the students to adjust to the new teacher with their own style, different materials and class management techniques. This can result in students becoming unsettled by these changes and voting with their feet through poor punctuality or not turning up at all.

Course assessment

Course assessment was ranked by students as the fifth most important of the nine retention strategies, with 60 per cent of respondents rating it as 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course. It was similarly ranked by the staff (as fourth most important out of the nine strategies) and was rated as the fourth most effectively implemented strategy (figure 4.13). Students were most positive about the way in which the assessment requirements for their course were explained to them and the helpfulness of the feedback received from teachers on their course work. However, their ratings were less favourable in relation to being kept regularly informed about their progress on the course and being given enough time in which to do their assignments (figure 4.9).

Thus, the majority of students in Colleges A and B understood the assessment procedures for their courses and had a fair idea as to how they attained their marks. This was not surprising, as most colleges have this as part of their College or Student Charter statements of how long it will take to have their work done, where to deposit it and get it back. Regular feedback to students on how they are progressing is very important because it can help reassure students who are considering withdrawing, helps them to learn from detailed feedback on course work and improve their performance and it can help staff to pick up early where students are having difficulties. Where assessment feedback is infrequent, insufficiently detailed or too negative this can obviously have a demotivating impact on students and undermine their confidence in their ability to succeed. Yorke (2000) confirms the use of constructive feedback as an important element or strategy in the first year of study, and that this can enable students to take a few tentative steps without fear of condemnation. He also argued that the use of formative assessment can help students who are struggling with their studies and reassure them.

The introduction of assessments at the very beginning of a course is crucial because, from my own professional experience, this can often be the point at which some students will drop out because they feel insufficiently prepared (particularly among students who are not used to course work-based assignments, either because they are more used to exams and/or because they are mature students who have not taken any form of academic assessment for a long period of time).

Student support

Support services within the colleges were seen by the students as the least important strategies for improving retention, being rated as the least important of the nine (figure 4.1), while college staff placed it eighth out of nine (figure 5.3). The most positively rated aspects of college support were the support available in using college learning facilities and tutorial support (figure 4.10), while student advice services and additional learning support received the lowest ratings. However, additional data from the qualitative interviews with students revealed that by and large the students viewed their tutors as being very supportive within classes.

This data appears to indicate that the colleges' *formal* support mechanism are not seen as a playing a significant role in helping students to stay and complete their courses, but suggest that individual tutors may be playing a significant *informal* role in supporting students on a day-to-day basis. However, the sort of academic support which teachers can and do provide may not necessarily me*et all* of the students' support needs. It is possible to see the formal college support services as being provided to meet students' more basic needs (e.g. financial support, childcare, assistance for disabled students, English language support) while teaching staff address their 'higher' needs in terms of engaging them with the curriculum and motivating and encouraging them to succeed. However there may be a danger if students are over-reliant on their tutors (who do not have the time and resources to me*et all* of the support needs they have) and, for whatever reasons, are reluctant to fully utilise formal college support services. Therefore it is vital that college support services are both of a high standard and are seen as accessible by students.

Research by NATFHE (2000) found that 'the quality of academic and pastoral support that students received are fundamental to student retention' (2000:1). McGivney (1996a), in relation to mature students, found that progress and wellbeing often depended upon the amount of understanding they receive within an institution. She argued that good staff and student relationships and the provision of practical and personal support for learners are the keys to better retention. Although one could argue that both colleges are providing support to students in the areas of pastoral support, finance, EMA, and supported individual study, the students' survey findings indicate that both colleges need to do more on student support – a clear example of where a retention strategy could be more effectively implemented.

College environment

The college environment was viewed by students as somewhat less important than most of the other retention strategies – just 45 per cent said that the environment is 'very important' in their decision to stay and complete their course (figure 4.1). The college staff interviewed actually placed it bottom out of the nine in terms of importance (figure 5.3). And in terms of implementation (figure 4.13) environment-related factors were ranked eight out of nine by the students. The environment was therefore viewed by staff and students as one of the less important factors for improving retention and also one where the implementation was less effective than with other strategies. College security arrangements were regarded by students as the most effectively implemented of the college environment factors (figure 4.11), whereas the quality of the learning environment (classrooms and workshops) and leisure facilities where students can socialise and relax were given the lowest ratings – only around a third of students rated these as being 'excellent' or 'good'.

It might appear therefore that the actual physical environment, despite being considered in need of improvement by most students, does not have an adverse effect on their motivation. However, the research by Martinez (2001) has emphasised the importance of the college environment, arguing that creating a conducive classroom environment for learning can enable both academic and psychosocial development. Other researchers (e.g. Felder-Silverman, 2001; Nelson & Post, 2002) have also argued that a greater number of students will persist on their course when they find the environment more like a home.

Martinez also highlighted the importance of integration into a vibrant social community, recommending specific team work activities to foster greater interaction between students and stimulate creativity. The basic message is that if the college environment is a stimulating and enjoyable place to be, both for academic and extra-curricular activities, then students are more likely to be retained. Pascarella *et al* (1986) have also pointed to the difference that colleges can make in improving the environment as an 'active force' that can have a positive impact on students, suggesting a more holistic approach to student-institutional interaction. They also called for colleges to hold more events outside the college premises as an additional measure that can improve students' retention.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance was rated by students as the eighth most important strategy out of the nine (figure 4.1) and the five items linked to quality assurance received the lowest rating for their implementation of any of the strategies (figure 4.13). Surprisingly, perhaps, quality assurance was also given a comparatively lowly rating by the staff, who placed it seventh out of the nine strategies in importance (figure 5.3). The aspects of quality assurance that received particularly low ratings by students for their implementation were those that were concerned with student involvement and the responsiveness of the colleges to students' concerns – thus, fewer than 40 per cent of the students gave positive ratings to the items relating to 'Opportunities for students to give feedback on the teaching', 'Clear complaints procedure if students are unhappy', 'Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints' and 'Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making' (figure 4.12).

These findings about quality assurance are a cause for concern for the managers of both colleges. Quality assurance is not just about the college side of assuring the quality of the teaching delivery and decision-making, it is also about the students' capacity to understand and participate in what has a direct impact upon them. There was some degree of dissatisfaction with how student complaints are dealt with and resolved by the colleges; and also the decision-making process. One simple example would be the management of the student's complaints. If a student has a complaint that is not properly addressed this could distract the student from focusing on their studies and they may not even turn up regularly until the matter is resolved. Therefore, no matter how effective the teaching delivery, teaching to half-empty classes and distracted students serves no practical point. It follows that something as simple this can have a marked impact upon attendance, achievement and long-term retention.

Wider implications and principles for the effective implementation of retention strategies

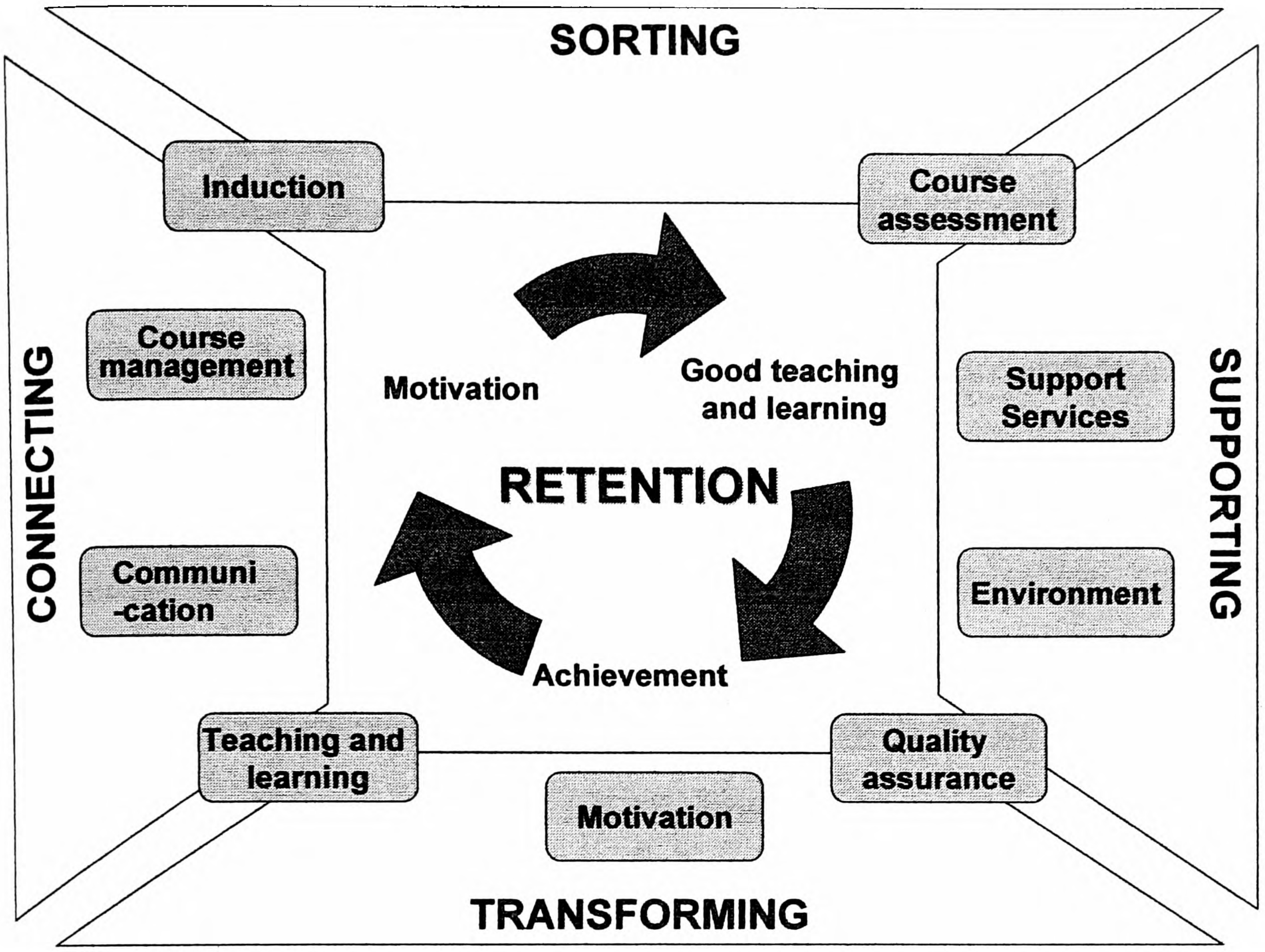
The interconnectedness of different retention strategies

This investigation has focussed on the identification of individual retention strategies, evaluating the effectiveness of their implementation in two colleges. However, important connections between the strategies have also been highlighted throughout. Beatty-Guenter's (1994) work on different types of retention strategy – based around the four processes of 'sorting', 'supporting', 'connecting' and 'transforming' – has been used to highlight these connections. For example, induction, course management, communication, teaching and learning and quality assurance all have elements of 'connecting' functions (that is developing and fostering relationships between students and the institution). An illustration of these connections comes from comparing the 45 items in the student survey when ordered according to type of retention strategy (appendix 7) and when ordered according to Beatty-Guenter's four categories (appendix 8).

To give some other examples of the interconnections between the nine strategies, communication (between staff and also between staff and students) is an important feature of course management (Davies, 1999); communication is also important in ensuring the effectiveness of student support services (Moxley *et al*, 2001; Barwuah *et al*, 1997); student motivation is strongly linked with the quality of teaching and learning (BTEC, 1993; Sellers & van der Velden, 2003); and motivation can also be influenced by factors such as the experience of induction, the nature of the college environment and course assessment (Prescott & Simpson, 2004; Martinez & Munday, 1998:91-2; York & Longden, 2004:143), effective course management (Davies, 1999; McGuire, 2000; Rose, 1996) and quality assurance (Martinez & Munday, 1998); teaching and learning, meanwhile, is importantly linked with communication (Smith & Bailey, 1993) and the college environment (Moxley et al, 2001:81).

The implication of the many connections between the nine different strategies is that there is a need for a holistic approach to student retention. Thus, as suggested by Martinez (1997a), Martinez, Houghton and Krupska (1998) and Moxley *et al* (2001), it is important that these strategies are not implemented in isolation but that they are integrated as part of a wider college retention strategy. Given the particularly strong importance attached by students and staff in this study to teaching and learning and student motivation, these key elements should be at the heart of any college retention strategy and should seek to foster virtuous cycles of retention. It is also important that retention strategies are not segmented into different phases or areas of college activities (which is a potential danger of approaching the issue in terms of the nine types of nine strategies on which I have focussed). For this reason it is also important that overarching (college) retention strategies are focussed on *processes* (sorting, supporting, connecting and transforming) as well as on practical areas of activity.

Figure 6.1 – Elements of a holistic college-wide retention strategy


SORTING
Induction
Course assessment
CONNECTING
Course management
Communi -cation
Motivation
Good teaching and learning
RETENTION
Achievement
SUPPORTING
Support Services
Environment
Teaching and learning
Motivation
Quality assurance
TRANSFORMING

(Elements of a holistic college-wide retention strategy - Developed by Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2007)

Figure 6.1 (above) represents the elements of such a holistic college-wide retention strategy. Reflecting the central findings from this study, namely the prime importance attached by students and staff to teaching and learning, and student motivation, these strategies appear at the heart of the diagram (derived from the 'virtuous cycle of retention' identified in the interviews with staff). These are the most important factors for ensuring student retention. However, while these two strategies are prioritised here, the diagram also indicates the importance of the interconnections between all nine strategies.

Thus, around the outside of the diagram is shown the four types of retention strategy identified by Beatty-Guenter (1994): sorting, supporting, transforming and connecting. The nine retention strategies that have been investigated here are then mapped on to the Beatty-Guenter categories. Some of these are seen as being strongly associated with a particular type of process, e.g. motivation is firmly to do with 'transforming' the student, support services with 'supporting', and communication with 'connecting'; others overlap types of retention strategy (i.e. induction is both about sorting students into appropriate groups and also connecting them with the institution; teaching and learning serves both to transform and to connect with students; quality assurance processes seek to support and transform; and the function of course assessment is both to sort students and to support them in their learning).

One implication of looking at retention strategies in this way is that all nine strategies are important and have a part to play – even when they may be perceived as being relatively less important by staff or students. For example, the relatively low ratings given by students to the college environment as a factor in their retention does not in itself mean that the environment is completely unimportant. Rather, it may simply indicate that the college environment is generally good and so is not seen as a 'problem' that may have a bearing on retention. Similarly, as an insider in College A, I was aware that some of the students who gave low evaluations of induction did so because they had not actually received it (because the level 2 course was a trimester-based course and therefore students recruited in the middle of the course were not inducted); thus, some students were unaware of the potential benefits of the induction process.

What is the most appropriate level for implementing retention strategies?

The argument for an integrated approach to student retention strategies implies that this is something that is co-ordinated and evaluated at the *college level*, with the support and involvement of senior college management. However, this does not mean that a centralised or top-down approach to each element of the strategy is most appropriate. Rather it seems that different strategies need to be led at different levels. Thus, quality assurance processes and the management and improvement of the college environment, for example, would seem to be best left to the college level. However, course management and assessment issues are clearly more appropriately dealt with at the departmental or course team level. Student support, on the other hand, may be split between college and departmental levels (for example, with services such as childcare and financial support centrally managed, and tutorial support co-ordinated at the faculty or department level). Meanwhile, teaching and learning is much more context-specific, meaning that 'Innovation at operational level will almost certainly be specific to the programme area, to the course and perhaps even to the individual cohort of students' (Martinez 1997a:111) – so prime responsibility here must lie with individual teachers. However, staff development activity and the exchange of good practice can take place at any (or all) of these different levels.

The importance of targeting

A striking finding to emerge from my study, given the differences between the two colleges in terms of size, composition and character, was the high degree of consistency between what the business studies students and staff in each college said. I expected to find some major differences in opinions between the two colleges and was surprised to find that students and staff expressed similar views on the importance of the nine retention strategies and even experienced their implementation in very similar ways (which may be indicative of a wider FE culture, which transcends the differences between individual colleges).[6] However, while the college factor appeared to be less significant, two major areas of difference were discovered: the level of course that students were on; and differences between students from different ethinc backgrounds. A major finding was that level 3 students were significantly more likely than those on level 2 courses to give positive ratings on a wide range of items linked to seven out of the nine strategies. My classroom observations also found more problems in the level 2 classes observed than in the level 3 classes. Differences were also found (albeit to a lesser extent) in terms of ethnic background, with Black students more likely than Asian and White students to give positive ratings on 8 out of the 45 items.

These findings point to the need for any interventions to improve student retention to be targeted on those groups most 'at risk' of disaffection and drop-out. Within the business departments of Colleges A and B this would mean focussing in particular on whether the different strategies were meeting the needs of level 2 students and those from White and Asian backgrounds. In the first instance this would mean close monitoring of the performance of these groups and staff liaising about how they are doing. If this is not sufficient to bring about improvement then specifically targeted measures should be considered, for example providing more regular tutorial support for level 2 students. Obviously, measures targeted according to ethnic background would have to be very carefully considered and sensitively implemented and could not give preferential treatment to students from some backgrounds and not others.

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[6] The most notable difference was that students in College B consistently rated the implementation of the nine different retention strategies more positively than the College A students (although only in a few cases were these differences found to be statistically significant).

Concluding Remarks

It is important to remember that this thesis investigation has focussed on just two Business departments within two London FE colleges. I cannot be certain that the findings from this investigation would apply across all of the other departments in the two colleges studied, let alone across FE as a whole. However, these two case studies have been studied in depth and over a period of time spanning three academic years, generating insights that chime with much of the literature on student retention. This has given me confidence in the findings and gives me reason to believe that the wider implications I have suggested would indeed have wider applicability. However, the only way for this to be proven would be for further research to be carried out into the implementation of retention strategies across a greater number of colleges.

Returning to a point raised at the beginning of this chapter, it is worth asking whether the increased focus of funding and quality improvement agencies on retention in FE will in fact support the effective implementation of retention strategies within colleges. On the one hand, the increased attention on the issue of student retention is likely to focus the minds of college staff on what they can do to further improve student retention. However, there is also a danger in that the increasing *pressure* to improve rates of retention could divert efforts from more holistic approaches (as discussed by figure 6.1) and, specifically, that the central importance of teaching and learning may be overlooked. Bloomer and Hodkinson's concerns on this point are still relevant today:

> *the place of learning within British FE policy needs to be rethought. It cannot be regarded as something that is easily manipulable by a system of controlled inputs and measured outputs... our findings cast serious doubts upon any system of payment by results, especially where the results are simply the achievement of qualifications.*
>
> (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997:87)

Whether the focus is on retention or the attainment of qualifications, the risk is that a narrow focus on these 'outputs' may lead to 'blinkered' thinking that may lose sight of the importance of the *processes* and of the *interconnections between strategies* that ultimately lead to these outcomes.

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APPENDIX 1: Letters written to college principals, staff and students explaining the research

[redacted]

Dear [redacted]-Principal.

I am writing to inform you of the research project which I am conducting in two FE colleges which [redacted] College is one of the chosen colleges. The research study is part of the requirements of my award for a Doctorate degree in education with the University of Greenwich.

The research will be focused on "effective implementation of strategies to promote students' retention in FE colleges, particularly as the case may be with the inner cities colleges in London. The studies will be based at two FE colleges; one of them has already accepted this study with them and I hope you would offer me the opportunity to conduct the study in your college.

In order to control the volume of the data, this study will focus on level 2, 3 and 4 courses in Business.

I would therefore, wish to seek your permission to please conduct an interview with some of your staff and students, including yourself. Can I please, book an appointment to visit your college on Monday 21/01/01 between 2-3pm to interview you on some of the retention issues?. I have attached the likely questions to ask you and also to your staff and students.

Naturally, participation in this research is voluntary and this will be made clear to all students and staff. All the information disclosed would be strictly confidential and no publication of the research work would be done without seeking your consent.

Please, contact me on my home email; [redacted] or telephone numbers [redacted]

Many thanks.

Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu
Doctorate Scholar-University of Greenwich/[redacted]

12/01/01

Dear [redacted] – Faculty Director for Business

I am writing to inform you of the research project which I am conducting in two FE colleges which [redacted] is one of the chosen colleges. The research study is part of the requirements of my award for a Doctorate degree in education with the University of Greenwich.

The research will be focused on "effective implementation of strategies to promote students' retention in FE colleges, particularly as it may affect inner city colleges in London. The studies will be based at two FE colleges and I hope you would offer me the opportunity to conduct the study in this college.

In order to control the volume of the data, this study will focus on level 2, 3 and 4 courses in Business.

I would therefore, wish to seek your permission to please conduct an interview with some of your staff and students, including yourself. Can I please, book an appointment to meet with you on Friday 25/01/01 between 12.30-1pm to interview you on some of the retention issues? I have attached the likely questions to ask you and also to your staff and students.

Naturally, participation in this research is voluntary and this will be made clear to all students and staff. All the information disclosed would be strictly confidential and no publication of the research work would be done without seeking your consent.

Please, let me know your availability for that day.

Many thanks.

Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu
Doctorate Scholar-University of Greenwich/[redacted]

Dear Colleagues

I am conducting a research project on strategies to improve retention focusing on three FE colleges in London as part fulfilment for award of Doctorate degree in education. I have selected a number of people from the two colleges to participate in the survey. I would appreciate your effort, if you could please spend approximately 15 minutes completing the enclosed questionnaires.

I am aware of how busy you are. The information you would provide will be contributing to an important and interesting study on effective implementation strategies to promote students' retention across FE colleges.

It is not essential to state your name, if you do state your name. The information provided will be strictly confidential. Please, note that all the questionnaires given out are lettered so that if I do not hear from you, further contact will be made with you.

Please, could you try and return the completed questionnaires with the self addressed envelop already stamped first class or drop them in my pigeon hole at Faculty Office in the Business department, by 21st January 2005.

I very much appreciate your cooperation to help in this survey. I hope you will find the questionnaire interesting.

Yours Sincerely,

Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu
Doctorate Scholar-University of Greenwich/[redacted]

Dear Students

I am pursuing a PhD research programme on improving retention and achievement in FE colleges, with a particular focus on two FE colleges. As part of the course requirement of Greenwich University I am conducting an initial survey on reasons for leaving and staying on your chosen course of study in the college. I would therefore appreciate your honest response to the attached questionnaires. All the information provided will be treated confidentially. You are not required to include your name on this survey and participation is voluntary. I thank you for the time spent in completing the questionnaire.

Please, could you try and return the completed questionnaires with the self addressed envelop already stamped first class or drop them in my pigeon hole at Faculty Office in the Business department, by 21st January 2005.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Achinehwu-Nworgu
Doctorate Scholar-University of Greenwich/[redacted]

Appendix 2 – First Student Survey

☐☐☐

STUDENT RETENTION SURVEY

This survey is part of research into different ways that Colleges can improve the retention of students. It asks about your views of the course and your experiences of being a student at the College.

PART A: DETAILS ABOUT YOU AND YOUR COURSE

Please tick (✓) one box for each question as it applies to you

A.1 **GENDER:** Male ☐ Female ☐

A.2 **AGE:** 16 – 24 ☐ 25 – 34 ☐ 35 – 44 ☐ 45 and over ☐

A.3 **MARITAL STATUS:** Married ☐ Single ☐

A.4 **Do you have children?** Yes ☐ No ☐

A.5 **ETHNICITY:**

Black ☐
Bangladeshi ☐
Chinese ☐
Indian ☐
Pakistani ☐
Turkish ☐
White ☐
Others ☐
Please specify..........................

A.6 **Which course are you doing?**

AS/A level Business - Year 1 ☐
AS/A level Business - Year 2 ☐
AVCE 3 Business - Year 1 ☐
AVCE 3 Business - Year 2 ☐
BTEC Intro. Diploma in Business ☐
BTEC Nat. Diploma in Business - Yr 1 ☐
BTEC Nat. Diploma in Business - Yr 2 ☐
BTEC National Certificate in IT ☐
GNVQ Foundation Business ☐
GNVQ Intermediate Business ☐
GNVQ Advanced Business - Year 1 ☐
GNVQ Advanced Business - Year 2 ☐
Newcad Business level 1 ☐
Newcad Business level 2 ☐

PART B: YOUR VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF THE COLLEGE

Please tick (✓) one box for each question

Section 1: Induction

1.1 **Were you given an induction when you joined the course?**

Yes ☐ No ☐ **(IF 'NO', PLEASE MOVE ON TO 2.1)**

1.2 **How did you find out about the induction?**

College admissions ☐ Friends ☐ Course manager ☐ Teacher/Lecturer ☐

1.3 **Who inducted you on the course?**

Principal ☐	Deputy Vice Principal ☐	Directors ☐
Course manager ☐	Course Co-ordinator ☐	Teachers/Lecturers ☐

1.4 **Did the induction provide you with the opportunity to do the following?**

Confirmed you on the course

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Receive/ understand your timetable

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Understand course content/ delivery

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Do diagnostic tests

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Complete an induction assignment

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Understand College rules/ regulations

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Receive an ID card

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Visit the College library

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

See the College's computing facilities

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

See the College's administration offices/ Campus office

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Make you aware of College support services

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Helped you make the right of choice course

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Helped you to transfer courses

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

1.5 **During the induction, did you meet the following College staff?**

Principal	Yes ☐	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
Deputy Vice Principal	Yes ☐	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
Course Managers	Yes ☐	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
Course Co-ordinators	Yes ☐	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
Teachers/ Lecturers	Yes ☐	No ☐	Don't Know ☐
Personal Tutors	Yes ☐	No ☐	Don't Know ☐

1.6 **Overall, how would you rate the things that you did during your induction?**

Very good ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Bad ☐ Don't Know ☐

1.7 **How important to you were the following elements of the induction?**

Being confirmed on the course

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Knowing more about your course

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Meeting other students

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Having a tour of the college

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Receiving your timetable

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Receiving your ID card

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Taking a diagnostic test

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Finding out about support services in the College

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Not very important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

1.8 **How could the induction be improved?**

……………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………

Section 2: Course Management

2.1 Which of these members of staff have you met? (Tick all that apply)

Principal ☐ Deputy Vice Principal ☐ Director ☐

Course Manager ☐ Course Co-ordinator ☐ Teacher/Lecturer ☐

Personal Tutor ☐

2.2 Do you know what they do in the College?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

2.3 How would you describe their approach to students' problems? (Tick one box)

College staff don't deal with students' problems ☐

College staff deal fairly with students' problems ☐

College staff deal quickly with students' problems ☐

Don't know ☐

2.4 Do you think that the members of staff listed above should make themselves more available to you?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

2.5 How do you think the course should be managed?

Course managers make all of the decisions ☐

Course managers consult students in decision making ☐

Course managers allow all decisions to be made by students ☐

Don't know ☐

2.6 Please give one or two reasons for your choice:

……………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………

2.7 Are you encouraged to participate/ contribute to the management of your course?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

2.8 In which of these ways can you make an input into the management of your course? (Tick all that apply)

Through Students Rep ☐ Meetings ☐

Individual involvement ☐

Student surveys ☐

Others ☐ Please specify.................................

2.9 Overall, how would you rate the management of your course?

Very Good ☐ Good ☐ Poor ☐ Very Poor ☐ Don't Know ☐

2.10 What could the College managers do to improve retention on your course?

....

....

....

Section 3: Motivation Factors

3.1 To what extent does each of the following factors motivate you to study in this college?

Your relationship with your fellow students

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Your relationship with the staff in the College

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Being given an award for having 100% punctuality/ attendance

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Punctuality/ attendance figures being displayed on notice boards

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The content of the course

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The way the course is organised

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Learning agreement/ Learning contract

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Your achievements and progress on the course

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Receiving additional support to help you on the course

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Receiving additional financial support (EMA)

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Effective teaching and learning

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The reputation of the College

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Ease of getting to the College from where you live

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

3.2 What measures could the College take to improve students' motivation to complete courses?

....

....

....

Section 4: Communication

4.1 **How important to you are each of the following forms of communication in the College?**

Getting help in deciding which course to study

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Being sent a relevant information pack about your course

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Speaking with a Manager about the course before you joined

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Speaking with a Teacher/ Lecturer about the course before you joined

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Speaking with a Personal Tutor about the course before you joined

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Clarity about the content and requirements of your course

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Being told about the location of your course

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

Being informed about changes in the course

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

4.2 **Overall, how important is effective communication to your decision to complete your course with the College?**

Most important ☐ Important ☐ Fairly important ☐ Not important ☐ Don't know ☐

4.3 **Overall, how do you rate the College in communicating information to students?**

Very good ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Bad ☐ Don't know ☐

4.4 **What steps could the College take to improve its communication with students?**

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………………………

Section 5: Teaching and Learning

5.1 **Please, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:**

My teachers are well organised

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

My teachers are knowledgeable in the subject area

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

The teaching is very effective

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

Lessons are interesting and relevant to the subject area

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

The teaching is varied and different learning materials are used

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

My teachers take total control of the lesson

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

My teachers encourage students to participate in lessons

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

My teachers are very supportive during lessons

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

I have a good rapport with my teachers

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

My teachers are always present and punctual to lessons

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

My classes are always covered in the absence of my teacher

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

I have a stable timetable

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

Section 6: Course Assessment

6.1 **Please, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:**

I understand how my course is assessed

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

I get regular feedback on my course work

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

I have an Individual Learning Plan to monitor my progress

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

There is too much assessment on the course

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

I am involved in tracking assignments

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

I am well informed about my progress over the year

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

The assessment on my course is very effective

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

I clearly understand the assessment criteria on my course

Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Don't know ☐

6.2 **How and when you are informed about your progress during the year?**

How?...

....

When?...

....

6.3 **Overall, how efficient is the assessment for your course?**

Very efficient ☐ Efficient ☐ Fairly efficient ☐ Not Efficient ☐ Don't Know ☐

6.4 **What could the College do to improve the assessment on your course and students' understanding of how they are being assessed?**

....

....

....

Section 7: College Support

7.1 **Please indicate which of the following sources of College support you have used:**

Tutorial support
Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

English support
Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Maths support
Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐
Counselling support
Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Childcare support
Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

Extra financial support (EMA)
Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐

7.2 **Please state any other types of support you have received from the College:**

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

7.3 **Please indicate how effective you think each of the following types of College support are that you have used:**

Tutorial Support

Very effective ☐ Effective ☐ Fairly effective ☐ Not effective ☐ Don't know ☐

English support

Very effective ☐ Effective ☐ Fairly effective ☐ Not effective ☐ Don't know ☐

Maths support

Very effective ☐ Effective ☐ Fairly effective ☐ Not effective ☐ Don't know ☐

Counselling support

Very effective ☐ Effective ☐ Fairly effective ☐ Not effective ☐ Don't know ☐

Childcare support

Very effective ☐ Effective ☐ Fairly effective ☐ Not effective ☐ Don't know ☐

Extra financial support

Very effective ☐ Effective ☐ Fairly effective ☐ Not effective ☐ Don't know ☐

7.4 **Please state how any of the support above has helped your decision to remain and complete your course with the College:**

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

7.5 **What could the College do to better support students that would help more students to remain and complete their courses?**

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

7.6 **Please indicate how true you think each of the following statements is about other support services in the College:**

The College library provides excellent services

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Support for help with the computers is excellent

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The student advice service provides excellent support

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The Student Union support me when I have problems

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The canteen provides excellent meals

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

College receptionists are very helpful in providing information

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

College administrative offices provide an excellent service

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The College employment service provides job opportunities

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Section 8: College Environment

8.1 **Please indicate how true you find each of the following statements about the college environment:**

Classrooms and workshops are always available and tidy

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The College environment is conducive for studying

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The College has good leisure facilities

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The College security system is good for protecting the students

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

I feel safe in the College

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Section 9: Quality Assurance

9.1 **Please indicate how true you find each of the following statements:**

The College has regular inspections of classes

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

Student complaints area always resolved

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

College staff treat students fairly

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The College should do more to encourage hard working students to stay on courses

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

The College should introduce tighter measures to improve student discipline

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

I would recommend my course to others

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

I would recommend the College to others

Always true ☐ Quite true ☐ Sometimes true ☐ Never true ☐ Don't know ☐

9.2 **What other measures would you suggest to the College to improve student retention?**

……………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………………………………………………………………………………

9.3 **What do you think the College is not doing well that can affect student retention?**

....

....

....

9.4 **What should the College do to change what it is not doing well that would help to improve student retention?**

....

....

....

9.5 **Please make a brief comment on how you found the design of the questionnaire:**

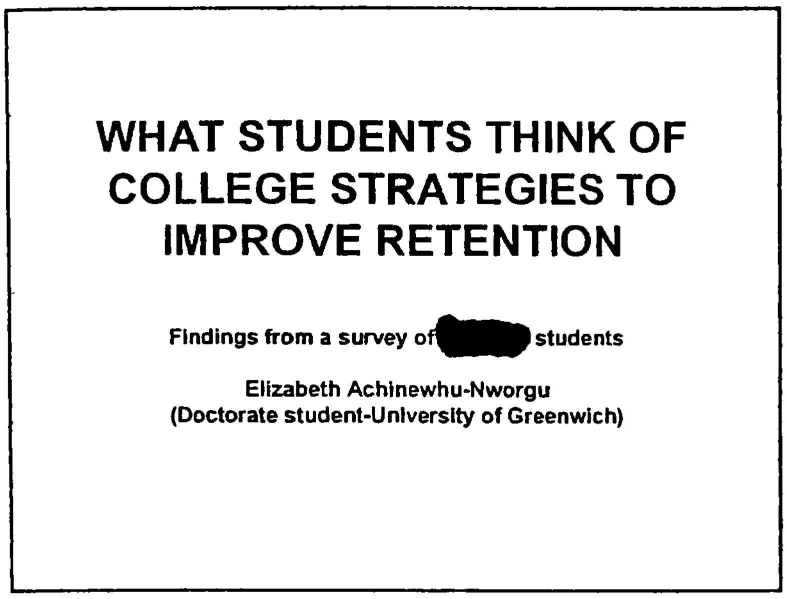
....

....

....

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

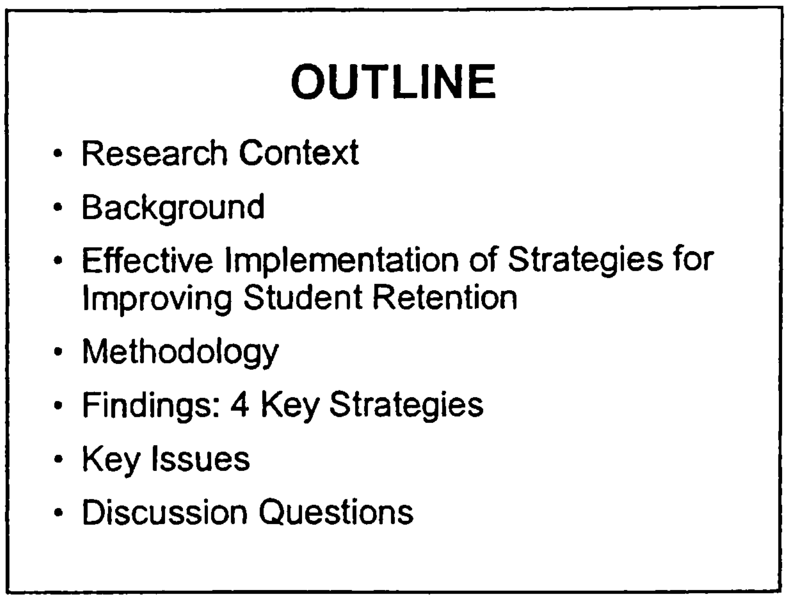
Appendix 3 Presentation of research findings made to College A Faculty Management Team (January 2006)



WHAT STUDENTS THINK OF COLLEGE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE RETENTION

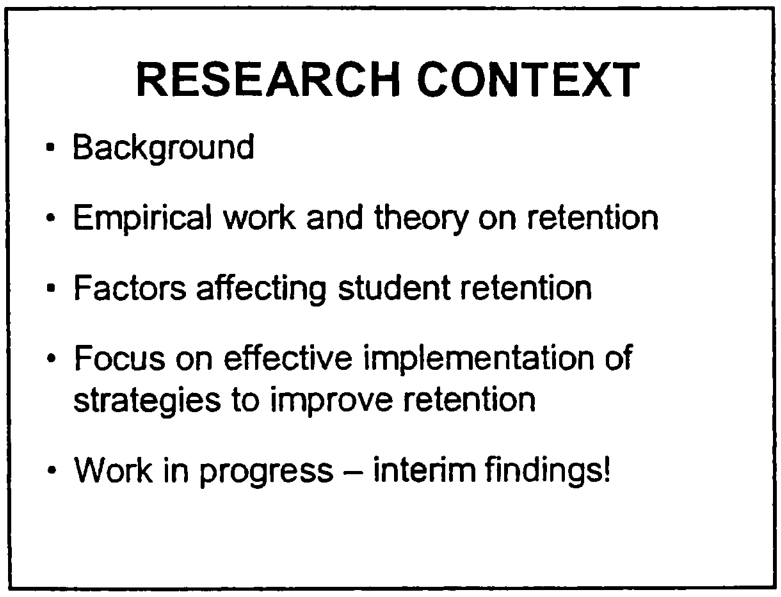
Findings from a survey of [redacted] students

Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu
(Doctorate student-University of Greenwich)



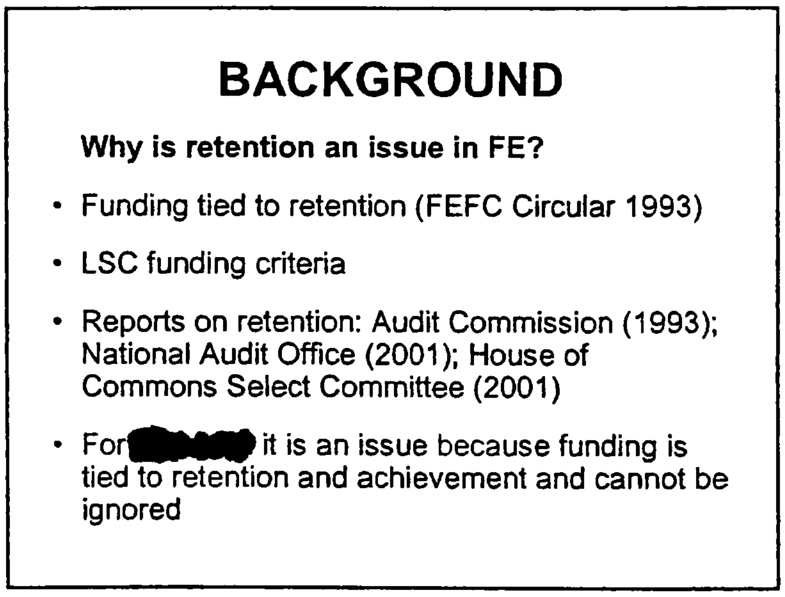
OUTLINE

- Research Context
- Background
- Effective Implementation of Strategies for Improving Student Retention
- Methodology
- Findings: 4 Key Strategies
- Key Issues
- Discussion Questions



RESEARCH CONTEXT

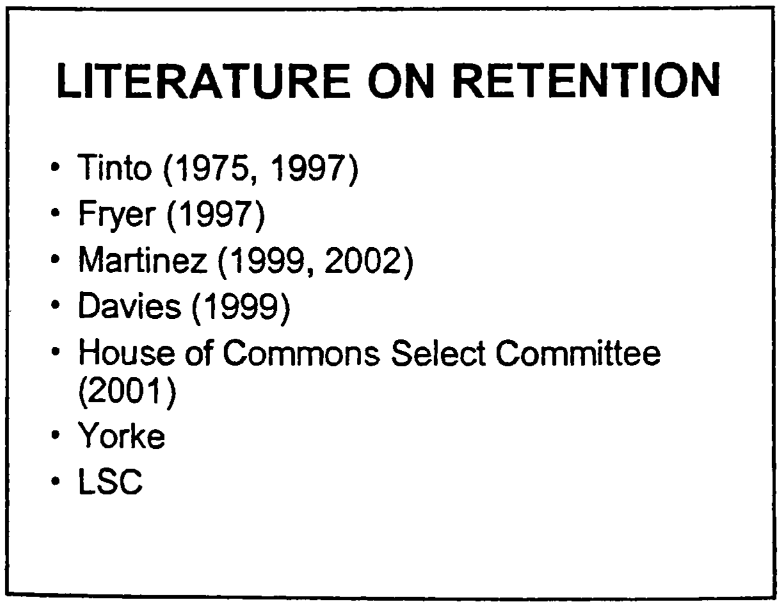
- Background
- Empirical work and theory on retention
- Factors affecting student retention
- Focus on effective implementation of strategies to improve retention
- Work in progress – interim findings!



BACKGROUND

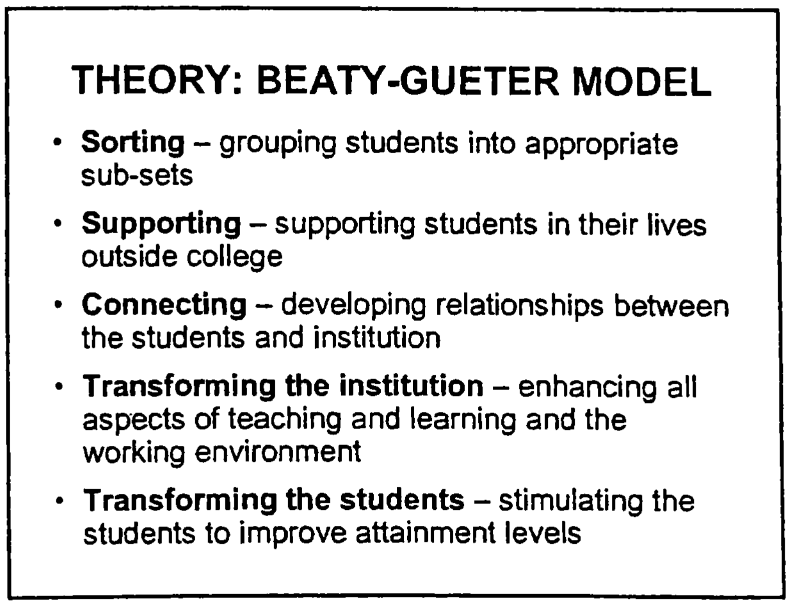
Why is retention an issue in FE?

- Funding tied to retention (FEFC Circular 1993)
- LSC funding criteria
- Reports on retention: Audit Commission (1993); National Audit Office (2001); House of Commons Select Committee (2001)
- For [redacted] it is an issue because funding is tied to retention and achievement and cannot be ignored



LITERATURE ON RETENTION

- Tinto (1975, 1997)
- Fryer (1997)
- Martinez (1999, 2002)
- Davies (1999)
- House of Commons Select Committee (2001)
- Yorke
- LSC



THEORY: BEATY-GUETER MODEL

- **Sorting** – grouping students into appropriate sub-sets
- **Supporting** – supporting students in their lives outside college
- **Connecting** – developing relationships between the students and institution
- **Transforming the institution** – enhancing all aspects of teaching and learning and the working environment
- **Transforming the students** – stimulating the students to improve attainment levels

FACTORS AFFECTING RETENTION

- Financial
- Domestic
- Understanding English
- Poor entry qualifications
- College admissions policy
- Wrong choice of course
- Transferred to another course/employment

BASIS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- Review of empirical studies on factors affecting retention
- Focus on effective strategies to improve retention
- 9 Key strategies were identified as the main focus

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT RETENTION

- Induction
- Course management
- Motivation factors
- Communication
- Teaching and learning
- Course assessment
- College support
- College environment
- Quality assurance

METHODOLOGY

- Self-completion questionnaire
- Mainly quantitative, but with some open questions included
- Business students in 2 colleges: [redacted]
- 133 respondents [redacted] = 63, [redacted] = 70)

FINDINGS: 4 KEY STRATEGIES

- Teaching and learning
- Course management
- College support
- Course assessment

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- **Importance of rapport with teachers, support and encouragement**
- **Majority of students satisfied with the quality of teaching**
- **Lessons not always covered when teacher is absent**
- **Not all teachers ‘take control’ of lessons**

COURSE MANAGEMENT

- Importance of stability: *"Have one teacher teaching and not changing all the time"*
- Problems dealt with quickly, fairly
- Students would like staff to be more accessible
- Desire for greater student involvement in decision-making: *"The college is for both managers and students"*

COLLEGE SUPPORT

- College support services, including additional learning support, rated highly
- *"EMA keeps me in college"*
- Learning support *"Encouraged me to work harder without stress"*
- Students critical of food available in the college

COURSE ASSESSMENT

- Students want clear communication around assessment criteria...
- ...and most felt that they get this
- Overall, 71% rated the assessment arrangements positively
- 40% feel there is too much assessment

KEY ISSUES / CONCERNS

Teaching and learning
- Lessons not being covered in the absence of teachers
- Not all teachers 'take control' of lessons

Course management
- Stability of staffing, timetables and rooms
- Availability of staff
- Student involvement in decision-making

KEY ISSUES / CONCERNS

College support
- Importance of EMA / financial support
- Poor utilisation of additional learning support
- Poor canteen facilities

Course assessment
- Clarity of assessments
- Too much assessment

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the 9 strategies do you think are most important for retention?
2. Which strategies are being implemented effectively?
   - College
   - Business Faculty
3. What needs to be done to improve the implementation of any of these strategies?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Based on the key issues identified by students to impact on their retention with the college. I would recommend that:

Teaching and Learning:

- Use SLAs for class cover
- HoLAs to have centralised staff schemes of work, lesson plans and teaching materials available or put on digital brain for class cover
- Head of School to organise training through QUILD on classroom management

Course management:

- Invite students to course team meetings to share ideas and concerns with staff
- Lesson time posted on classroom doors to indicate room availability

Staff time table to be available before the beginning of term

College Support

- More awareness of available resources e.g. encourage students to use digital brains for course materials
- Enforce attendance of additional support to those who need them through SLAs, CTLs and HoLAs

Course assessment:

Grading and criteria sheet to be given with the assignment with clear explanation

- A dedicated lesson to explain assignment expectation, outcomes and grading criteria to the students
- Have assessment schedule with dates for submission
- Cooperation and team work between all managers, staff and students.

APPENDIX 4: Initial survey instruments used in preliminary investigation with HND students and staff in College A

This section of the questionnaire is devoted to early leavers
Tick the appropriate box (x) as it applies to you.

PERSONAL DATA:

GENDER:

Are you	Male	☐	Female	☐

AGE:

What age group are you?	16 – 24	☐
	25 – 34	☐
	35 – 44	☐
	45 – 54	☐
	55 and over	☐

MARITAL STATUS:

Are you	Married	☐	Single	☐
Do you have children?	Yes	☐	No	☐

ETHNICITY:

Which one of the following ethnic groups do you belong to?

Black	☐
Bangladesh	☐
Indian	☐
Chinese	☐
White	☐
Other please specify.	☐

Section 1 – students

Reason for leaving

Of the following possible reasons for leaving your course, please indicate the degree of importance for you by ticking the appropriate box **(x)**.

	Most Important	Important	Not Important
Wrong choice of the Course	☐	☐	☐
Lack of teaching and Support	☐	☐	☐
Poor induction programmes	☐	☐	☐
Lack of tutorial support	☐	☐	☐
Poor Course materials and content	☐	☐	☐
College environment	☐	☐	☐
Domestic Problems	☐	☐	☐
Finance	☐	☐	☐
Course organisation	☐	☐	☐
Understanding English	☐	☐	☐
Transferred to another course	☐	☐	☐
Over assessed	☐	☐	☐
Others please specify	☐	☐	☐

What improvement do you suggest to be made on the course to maintain quality, efficiency and to encourage you to joining the course?

Please specify ....

Section 2 – Progression Route

Students

After leaving the course, please indicate what you did afterward by ticking the appropriate box **(x)**

Left education ☐

Transferred to another course
Within the college ☐

Progressed to HE ☐

Transferred to another College ☐

Gained employment ☐

Other please specify ☐

Section 3 – Teaching staff and Management

Please tick the boxes **(x)** that best describes your perception about students reason for leaving.

Do you agree or disagree that the following have contributed to early withdrawal of HND/HNC students?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
Poor entry qualifications	☐	☐	☐	☐
Language Barrier	☐	☐	☐	☐
Wrong choice of course	☐	☐	☐	☐
Finance	☐	☐	☐	☐
Dismissal	☐	☐	☐	☐
Domestic Problems	☐	☐	☐	☐
Can't cope on the course	☐	☐	☐	☐
Gained employment	☐	☐	☐	☐
Transfer to another course	☐	☐	☐	☐
Progressed to HE	☐	☐	☐	☐

Others please specify...

APPENDIX 5: Exploratory staff and student surveys in College A

Pilot Questionnaire on retention issues/strategies.

FOR STAFF

1. Are you a (please tick one):
Teacher... Programme/Curriculum leader... Head of School....

2. If you are a teacher, what age group do you teach (please tick)
14-16 group... 17-19 group ... 19 plus...

3. In which curriculum area do you teach? (Please state.) ....

4. If you are a programme or curriculum leader or, head of school, do you have teaching responsibility?
Yes .... No ......

5. If yes, what age group do you teach (please tick)
14-16 group... 16-19 group ... 19 plus...

6. Very briefly, state your understanding of the college policy on retention?
....

....

....

....

7. Please state briefly five of the college policy on retention.
....

....

....

....

....

8. Please state briefly the college strategies on promoting retention (if different from the above policy).
....
....

....

....

9. In your view, how effective has been these strategies in promoting retention in the college? (You may use the course(s) you teach to illustrate your answer.)

....

....

....

....

....

10. What factors would you say promote effective implementation of the college strategies on retention?

....

....

....

....

11. What factors would you say hinder effective implementation of the college strategies on retention?

....

....

....

....

12. Other comments: what suggestion(s) do you have for effective implementation of the college strategies on retention? (You may use the course(s) you teach to illustrate your answer.)

....

....

....

....

END – thank you.

Please return completed questions to the address given on back of the envelope provided.

FOR STUDENTS

1. Please circle whether you are: male / Female?

2. Please circle your age group: 14 – 16 17 – 19 19 and over

3. What course are you on?
Please state the course and the level
……………………………………………
……………………………………………

4. Is your course: Please circle:
full time or part time?

5. Please circle whether you are: Black Asian White Chinese

6. What were your Qualifications before coming on this course?
…………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………

7. List one or two reasons why you chose this course?
…………………………………………………
…………………………………………………
…………………………………………………

8. What motivated you to choose this college for your study?
…………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………

9. Do you wish to complete your course in this college?
Please circle: Yes / No

10. List three things that would encourage you to complete your course with the college?
……………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………

11. List three things that would make you NOT to complete your course with the college……………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………

12. How would you rate teaching on your course? (Please Circle one)

Very poor Poor Unsatisfactory Satisfactory Good Very Good

13. List three support that you receive from the college to help your learning

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

14. What is the overall assessment of the quality of the support available?
Please circle one:

Very poor poor unsatisfactory satisfactory Good Very Good

15. Do you understand the college policy on retention?
Briefly state your answer:

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

16. Do you understand college strategies on students' retention?
Please, briefly describe them?

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

17. How have these strategies helped your decision to stay on the course?

………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………

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18. What other suggestions do you wish the college to consider as strategies to promote retention?

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Please list two or three points.

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END- Many thanks
Please, return the completed questions to your class teacher.

Appendix 6 – Second Student Survey

☐☐☐

STUDENT RETENTION SURVEY

This survey is part of research into different ways that colleges can improve student retention. It asks for your views on your course and your experiences of being a student at this college. If there are any questions which you do not understand, please ask your teacher to explain.

PART A: VIEWS ON YOUR COURSE AND THE COLLEGE

This section asks you to give your rating of different aspects of your course and the college. Please tick (✓) one box for each question.

1. Induction

Please rate each of the following elements of the induction period at the start of your course:

a. **Having the content and requirements of your course clearly explained**

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. **Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course (e.g. speaking with you about this, giving you a test)**

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. **Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities)**

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. **Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students)**

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. **Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff**

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

2. Course management

Please rate each of the following elements of the way in which your course is managed:

a. Overall organisation of your course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. How quickly the staff on your course deal with students' problems

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. How fairly the staff on your course deal with students' problems

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. Opportunities to have a say in decisions about how your course is run

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

3. Motivation factors

Please rate each of the following factors linked to your own motivation to complete the course:

a. How well course teachers motivate you to complete the course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. How achieving the qualification at the end motivates you to complete the course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. How college rules on attendance motivate you to complete the course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

4. Communication

Please rate each of the following elements of the college's communication with students:

a. Providing information to help you make the right choice of course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. Explaining the content and requirements of your course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. Informing you about any changes in the course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. Giving you information about college matters (e.g. college events, student support services, college rules)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

5. Teaching and Learning

Please rate each of the following elements of the teaching and learning on your course:

a. How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. How good teachers are at taking control of lessons

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. How varied the teaching is (e.g. using different learning materials, different activities)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. How well the teachers relate to students (e.g. supportive, treating students with respect, having a good rapport)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. How well the teachers encourage students to actively participate in lessons

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

6. Course assessment

Please rate each of the following elements of the assessment on your course:

a. How clearly the assessment for the course has been explained to you

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. How clear the assessment criteria are on individual assignments you are given

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year (e.g. teachers talking to you, individual tutorials, Individual Learning Plan)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. Being given the right amount of assessment and a reasonable amount of time in which to do it

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

7. College support

Please rate each of the following types of support that are available to students in the college:

a. Tutorial support (one-to-one meetings with your teachers)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. Additional learning support teachers or classes (e.g. in English or Maths)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. Support in using college learning facilities (e.g. library, computers)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. Financial support (e.g. EMA, advice on work and benefits, help with childcare costs)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. Student advice services (e.g. guidance on careers and further study, counselling service, Student Union)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

8. College environment

Please rate each of the following elements of the college environment:

a. Classrooms and workshops that are always available when needed

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. Classrooms and workshops that are suitable and tidy

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. An environment in which it is easy to study

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. Security arrangements that make the college safe for students

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

9. Quality assurance

Please rate each of the following elements of the college's quality assurance processes:

a. Monitoring of classes by the college to ensure high standards of teaching

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

b. Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

c. Clear complaints procedure if students are unhappy

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

d. Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

e. Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course (e.g. student reps)

Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Satisfactory ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐ Don't know ☐

PART B: RETENTION STRATEGIES

This section asks about the importance to you of different things the college and its staff can do to give students a better experience. You are asked to think about what is important in helping you to complete your course. If you are unsure about what any of the categories mean, please refer back to the questions in section A or ask your teacher.

Please tick (✓) one box for each question:

1. **How important is having an effective induction in your decision to stay and complete your course?**
   Very important ☐
   Quite important ☐
   Not very important ☐
   Not important at all ☐
   Don't know ☐

2. **How important is having effective course management in your decision to stay and complete your course?**
   Very important ☐
   Quite important ☐
   Not very important ☐
   Not important at all ☐
   Don't know ☐

3. **How important is your own motivation in your decision to stay and complete your course?**
   Very important ☐
   Quite important ☐
   Not very important ☐
   Not important at all ☐
   Don't know ☐

4. **How important is effective communication by the college in your decision to stay and complete your course?**
   Very important ☐
   Quite important ☐
   Not very important ☐
   Not important at all ☐
   Don't know ☐

5. **How important is effective teaching and learning in your decision to stay and complete your course?**

Very important ☐
Quite important ☐
Not very important ☐
Not important at all ☐
Don't know ☐

6. **How important is effective course assessment in your decision to stay and complete your course?**

Very important ☐
Quite important ☐
Not very important ☐
Not important at all ☐
Don't know ☐

7. **How important are effective college support services for students in your decision to stay and complete your course?**

Very important ☐
Quite important ☐
Not very important ☐
Not important at all ☐
Don't know ☐

8. **How important is the quality of the college environment in your decision to stay and complete your course?**

Very important ☐
Quite important ☐
Not very important ☐
Not important at all ☐
Don't know ☐

9. **How important are the college's quality assurance processes in your decision to stay and complete your course?**

Very important ☐
Quite important ☐
Not very important ☐
Not important at all ☐
Don't know ☐

PART C: DETAILS ABOUT YOU AND YOUR COURSE

Please tick (✓) one box for each question as it applies to you:

GENDER: Male ☐ Female ☐

AGE: 16-19 ☐ 20-24 ☐ 25-29 ☐ 30-34 ☐ 35 and over ☐

ETHNIC BACKGROUND:

Black ☐ Bangladeshi ☐ Chinese ☐ Indian ☐ Pakistani ☐

Turkish ☐ White ☐ Other ☐ Please specify……………………….

Do you receive EMA? Yes ☐ No ☐

MARITAL STATUS: Married ☐ Single ☐

Do you have children? Yes ☐ No ☐

Which course are you doing?

AS/A level Business - Year 1 ☐

AS/A level Business - Year 2 ☐

AVCE 3 Business - Year 1 ☐

AVCE 3 Business - Year 2 ☐

BTEC Intro. Diploma in Business ☐

BTEC Nat. Diploma in Business - Yr 1 ☐

BTEC Nat. Diploma in Business - Yr 2 ☐

BTEC National Certificate in IT ☐

GNVQ Foundation Business ☐

GNVQ Intermediate Business ☐

GNVQ Advanced Business - Year 1 ☐

GNVQ Advanced Business - Year 2 ☐

Newcad Business level 1 ☐

Newcad Business level 2 ☐

Newcad Entry level IT ☐

Finally, please comment on how you found the design of this questionnaire:

....

....

....

Thank you for taking part in this survey. Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu (Doctorate Student, University of Greenwich)

Appendix 7 – 45 Response Items used in Second Student Survey

Induction
1a Having the content and requirements of your course clearly explained
1b Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course (e.g. speaking with you about this, giving you a test)
1c Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities)
1d Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students)
1e Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff

Course management
2a Overall organisation of your course
2b How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are
2c How quickly the staff on your course deal with students' problems
2d How fairly the staff on your course deal with students' problems
2e Opportunities to have a say in decisions about how your course is run

Motivation
3a How well course teachers motivate you to complete the course
3b How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it
3c How achieving the qualification at the end motivates you to complete the course
3d How college rules on attendance motivate you to complete the course
3e How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course

Communication
4a Providing information to help you make the right choice of course
4b Explaining the content and requirements of your course
4c Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments)
4d Informing you about any changes in the course
4e Giving you information about college matters (e.g. college events, student support services, college rules)

Teaching and Learning
5a How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons
5b How good teachers are at taking control of lessons
5c How varied the teaching is (e.g. using different learning materials, different activities)
5d How well the teachers relate to students (e.g. supportive, treating students with respect, having a good rapport)
5e How well the teachers encourage students to actively participate in lessons

Course Assessment
6a How clearly the assessment for the course has been explained to you
6b How clear the assessment criteria are on individual assignments you are given
6c How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work
6d Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year (e.g. teachers talking to you, individual tutorials, Individual Learning Plan)4e Giving you information about college matters (e.g. college events, student support services, college rules)
6e Being given the right amount of assessment and a reasonable amount of time in which to do it

College Support
7a Tutorial support (one-to-one meetings with your teachers)
7b Additional learning support teachers or classes (e.g. in English or Maths)
7c Support in using college learning facilities (e.g. library, computers)
7d Financial support (e.g. EMA, advice on work and benefits, help with childcare costs)
7e Student advice services (e.g. guidance on careers and further study, counselling service, Student Union)

College Environment
8a Classrooms and workshops that are always available when needed
8b Classrooms and workshops that are suitable and tidy
8c An environment in which it is easy to study
8d Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax
8e Security arrangements that make the college safe for students

Quality Assurance
9a Monitoring of classes by the college to ensure high standards of teaching
9b Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course
9c Clear complaints procedure if students are unhappy
9d Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints
9e Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course (e.g. student reps)

Appendix 8 – List of 45 Response Items Grouped According to Beatty-Guenter's categories of retention strategy

Type of Strategy (adapted from Johnston, 2001)[1]	***Questions***
Sorting Ensuring students are doing the right course at the appropriate level *(2 Questions)*	1b Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course (e.g. speaking with you about this, giving you a test) 4a Providing information to help you make the right choice of course
Transforming the institution Enhancing all aspects of the teaching, learning and assessment, and the college working environments, through effective course management and college policies *(20 Questions)*	1a Having the content and requirements of your course clearly explained 2a Overall organisation of your course 2c How quickly the staff on your course deal with students' problems 2d How fairly the staff on your course deal with students' problems 3d How college rules on attendance motivate you to complete the course 4b Explaining the content and requirements of your course 4c Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments) 4d Informing you about any changes in the course 5b How good teachers are at taking control of lessons 6a How clearly the assessment for the course has been explained to you 6b How clear the assessment criteria are on individual assignments you are given 6e Being given the right amount of assessment and a reasonable amount of time in which to do it 8a Classrooms and workshops that are always available when needed 8b Classrooms and workshops that are suitable and tidy 8c An environment in which it is easy to study 8d Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax 8e Security arrangements that make the college safe for students 9a Monitoring of classes by the college to ensure high standards of teaching 9c Clear complaints procedure if students are unhappy 9d Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints
Transforming the student Stimulating the student to improve attainment levels and skills through effective teaching and learning strategies *(8 Questions)*	3a How well course teachers motivate you to complete the course 3b How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it 3c How achieving the qualification at the end motivates you to complete the course 5a How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons 5c How varied the teaching is (e.g. using different learning materials, different activities) 5e How well the teachers encourage students to actively participate in lessons 6c How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work 6d Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year (e.g. teachers talking to you, individual tutorials, Individual Learning Plan)
Connecting Developing and fostering relationships between students and	1e Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff 2b How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are 2e Opportunities to have a say in decisions about how your course is run 4e Giving you information about college matters (e.g. college events, student

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[1] The main difference here from the way in which Johnston has used the Beaty-Guenter retention strategy model is in broadening the 'Supporting' category to include learning support strategies within college as well as strategies for supporting students in their lives outside college, as such a neat division seems hard to maintain in practice. This then means that the category 'Transforming the Student' focuses primarily on the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies used on the course (i.e. as distinct from supplementary learning support strategies in the college).

the institution *(7 Questions)*	support services, college rules) 5d How well the teachers relate to students (e.g. supportive, treating students with respect, having a good rapport) 9b Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course 9e Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course (e.g. student reps)
Supporting Supporting students in their lives outside college and in their learning in college *(8 Questions)*	1c Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities) 1d Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students) 3e How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course 7a Tutorial support (one-to-one meetings with your teachers) 7b Additional learning support teachers or classes (e.g. in English or Maths) 7c Support in using college learning facilities (e.g. library, computers) 7d Financial support (e.g. EMA, advice on work and benefits, help with childcare costs) 7e Student advice services (e.g. guidance on careers and further study, counselling service, Student Union)

Appendix 9 - Sample observation sheet

FENTO Key Area	1	2	3	4	Comments
Key Area A – Assessing Learners' Needs					
Awareness of needs of individuals' / group					
Differentiated learning objectives (if applic)					
Plan takes account of prior knowledge					
Key Area B – Planning and Preparing Teaching					
Structured lesson plan					
Aims and objectives					
Planning to meet learners' needs					
Links to prior and future learning					
Checks on learning incorporated					
Appropriate to level					
Awareness of learning domains/taxonomies					
Key Area C – Developing and Using a Range of teaching and learning techniques					
Teaching and learning activities					
Sequencing					
Differentiation					
Resources (inc ICT if appropriate)					
Questioning					
Key Skills					
Inspiration and challenge					
Key Area D – Managing the Learning Process					
Classroom presence					
Flexibility					
Communication					
Pace and flow					
Transitions					
Environment					
Behaviour management					
Involving learners					
Equality of opportunity					
Key Area E – Providing Learners with support					
Support for individual needs					
Stretching learners					
Working with support worker (if applic)					
Key Area F – Assessing the Outcomes of learning and learners' achievements					
Learners self-assessing					
Learner feedback on learning					
Teacher feedback on learning					
Checks on learning and progression					

General Comments
Issues to be addressed

Lesson grade (please tick)	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4

1 = Very Good (pass) 2 = Good (pass) 3 = Satisfactory (pass) 4 = Unsatisfactory (fail)

Signature of assessor

Appendix 10 SPSS Output from Second Student Survey

Chi-Square Tests for strategies on which statistically significant differences were found according to college, course level, gender, ethnicity or EMA

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Induction

Having the content and requirements of your course clearly explained * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Having the content and requirements of your course clearly explained	Excellent or Good	Count	38	89	127
		% within Course level	50.7%	66.4%	60.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	37	45	82
		% within Course level	49.3%	33.6%	39.2%
Total		Count	75	134	209
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.004(b)	1	.025		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.365	1	.037		
Likelihood Ratio	4.967	1	.026		
Fisher's Exact Test				.028	.019
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.980	1	.026		
N of Valid Cases	209				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 29.43.

Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course (e.g. speaking with you about this, giving you a test) * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
Course teachers making sure that you had chosen the right course (e.g. speaking with you about this, giving you a test)	Excellent or Good	Count	56	36	16	108
		% within Ethnic background	66.7%	45.0%	45.7%	54.3%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	28	44	19	91
		% within Ethnic background	33.3%	55.0%	54.3%	45.7%
Total		Count	84	80	35	199
		% within Ethnic background	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.004(a)	2	.011
Likelihood Ratio	9.119	2	.010
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.739	1	.009
N of Valid Cases	199		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 16.01.

Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities) * College

Crosstab

			College		Total
			College A	College B	
Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities)	Excellent or Good	Count	63	75	138
		% within College	57.8%	72.8%	65.1%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	46	28	74
		% within College	42.2%	27.2%	34.9%
Total		Count	109	103	212
		% within College	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.256(b)	1	.022		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.616	1	.032		
Likelihood Ratio	5.298	1	.021		
Fisher's Exact Test				.030	.016
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.231	1	.022		
N of Valid Cases	212				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 35.95.

Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities) * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Being given information about learning resources in the college (e.g. library, computer facilities)	Excellent or Good	Count	43	95	138
		% within Course level	55.8%	70.4%	65.1%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	34	40	74
		% within Course level	44.2%	29.6%	34.9%
Total		Count	77	135	212
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.554(b)	1	.033		
Continuity Correction(a)	3.937	1	.047		
Likelihood Ratio	4.501	1	.034		
Fisher's Exact Test				.037	.024
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.532	1	.033		
N of Valid Cases	212				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 26.88.

Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students) * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students)	Excellent or Good	Count	26	75	101
		% within Course level	35.1%	56.4%	48.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	48	58	106
		% within Course level	64.9%	43.6%	51.2%
Total		Count	74	133	207
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.598(b)	1	.003		
Continuity Correction(a)	7.768	1	.005		
Likelihood Ratio	8.699	1	.003		
Fisher's Exact Test				.004	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.556	1	.003		
N of Valid Cases	207				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 36.11.

Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students) * Gender

Crosstab

			Gender		
			Male	Female	Total
Being given information about other support services in the college (e.g. campus office, careers advice, counselling service, financial support for students)	Excellent or Good	Count	43	53	96
		% within Gender	38.7%	61.6%	48.7%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	68	33	101
		% within Gender	61.3%	38.4%	51.3%
Total		Count	111	86	197
		% within Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.161(b)	1	.001		
Continuity Correction(a)	9.266	1	.002		
Likelihood Ratio	10.246	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.002	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.110	1	.001		
N of Valid Cases	197				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 41.91.

Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff	Excellent or Good	Count	16	65	81
		% within Course level	21.6%	48.9%	39.1%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	58	68	126
		% within Course level	78.4%	51.1%	60.9%
Total		Count	74	133	207
	% within Course level		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.823(b)	1	.000		
Continuity Correction(a)	13.701	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	15.525	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.752	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	207				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 28.96.

Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff * Gender

Crosstab

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff	Excellent or Good	Count	34	42	76
		% within Gender	30.6%	49.4%	38.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	77	43	120
		% within Gender	69.4%	50.6%	61.2%
Total		Count	111	85	196
		% within Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.152(b)	1	.007		
Continuity Correction(a)	6.383	1	.012		
Likelihood Ratio	7.151	1	.007		
Fisher's Exact Test				.008	.006
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.116	1	.008		
N of Valid Cases	196				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 32.96.

Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff * Do you receive EMA?

Crosstab

			Do you receive EMA?		Total
			Yes	No	
Having the opportunity to meet a range of college staff	Excellent or Good	Count	31	48	79
		% within Do you receive EMA?	32.3%	46.2%	39.5%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	65	56	121
		% within Do you receive EMA?	67.7%	53.8%	60.5%
Total		Count	96	104	200
		% within Do you receive EMA?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.014(b)	1	.045		
Continuity Correction(a)	3.455	1	.063		
Likelihood Ratio	4.037	1	.045		
Fisher's Exact Test				.060	.031
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.994	1	.046		
N of Valid Cases	200				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 37.92.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Course management

Overall organisation of your course * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Overall organisation of your course	Excellent or Good	Count	34	78	112
		% within Course level	42.5%	59.1%	52.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	46	54	100
		% within Course level	57.5%	40.9%	47.2%
Total		Count	80	132	212
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.502(b)	1	.019		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.856	1	.028		
Likelihood Ratio	5.515	1	.019		
Fisher's Exact Test				.023	.014
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.476	1	.019		
N of Valid Cases	212				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 37.74.

How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are	Excellent or Good	Count	33	76	109
		% within Course level	41.8%	57.1%	51.4%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	46	57	103
		% within Course level	58.2%	42.9%	48.6%
Total		Count	79	133	212
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.687(b)	1	.030		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.092	1	.043		
Likelihood Ratio	4.703	1	.030		
Fisher's Exact Test				.034	.021
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.665	1	.031		
N of Valid Cases	212				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 38.38.

How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are * Gender

Crosstab

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
How accessible and approachable the staff on your course are	Excellent or Good	Count	51	51	102
		% within Gender	43.2%	60.7%	50.5%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	67	33	100
		% within Gender	56.8%	39.3%	49.5%
Total		Count	118	84	202
		% within Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.007(b)	1	.014		
Continuity Correction(a)	5.328	1	.021		
Likelihood Ratio	6.044	1	.014		
Fisher's Exact Test				.016	.010
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.978	1	.014		
N of Valid Cases	202				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 41.58.

How quickly the staff on your course deal with students' problems * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How quickly the staff on your course deal with students' problems	Excellent or Good	Count	25	71	96
		% within Course level	32.9%	55.5%	47.1%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	51	57	108
		% within Course level	67.1%	44.5%	52.9%
Total		Count	76	128	204
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.754(b)	1	.002		
Continuity Correction(a)	8.869	1	.003		
Likelihood Ratio	9.905	1	.002		
Fisher's Exact Test				.002	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.706	1	.002		
N of Valid Cases	204				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 35.76.

How fairly the staff on your course deal with students' problems * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How fairly the staff on your course deal with students' problems	Excellent or Good	Count	24	60	84
		% within Course level	31.6%	46.2%	40.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	52	70	122
		% within Course level	68.4%	53.8%	59.2%
Total		Count	76	130	206
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.219(b)	1	.040		
Continuity Correction(a)	3.637	1	.057		
Likelihood Ratio	4.283	1	.038		
Fisher's Exact Test				.056	.028
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.198	1	.040		
N of Valid Cases	206				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 30.99.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Motivation Factors

How well course teachers motivate you to complete the course * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How well course teachers motivate you to complete the course	Excellent or Good	Count	40	100	140
		% within Course level	50.0%	75.2%	65.7%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	40	33	73
		% within Course level	50.0%	24.8%	34.3%
Total		Count	80	133	213
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.069(b)	1	.000		
Continuity Correction(a)	12.973	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	13.911	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.003	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	213				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 27.42.

How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it	Excellent or Good	Count	43	96	139
		% within Course level	55.1%	72.2%	65.9%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	35	37	72
		% within Course level	44.9%	27.8%	34.1%
Total		Count	78	133	211
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.360(b)	1	.012		
Continuity Correction(a)	5.624	1	.018		
Likelihood Ratio	6.281	1	.012		
Fisher's Exact Test				.016	.009
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.330	1	.012		
N of Valid Cases	211				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 26.62.

How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
How your interest in the content of the course motivates you to complete it	Excellent or Good	Count	65	54	18	137
		% within Ethnic background	77.4%	62.8%	51.4%	66.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	19	32	17	68
		% within Ethnic background	22.6%	37.2%	48.6%	33.2%
Total		Count	84	86	35	205
		% within Ethnic background	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.596(a)	2	.014
Likelihood Ratio	8.666	2	.013
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.501	1	.004
N of Valid Cases	205		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.61.

How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course * College

Crosstab

			College		Total
			College A	College B	
How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course	Excellent or Good	Count	43	57	100
		% within College	45.7%	62.6%	54.1%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	51	34	85
		% within College	54.3%	37.4%	45.9%
Total		Count	94	91	185
		% within College	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.313(b)	1	.021		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.654	1	.031		
Likelihood Ratio	5.341	1	.021		
Fisher's Exact Test				.027	.015
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.284	1	.022		
N of Valid Cases	185				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 41.81.

How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course	Excellent or Good	Count	44	45	9	98
		% within Ethnic background	60.3%	57.7%	32.1%	54.7%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	29	33	19	81
		% within Ethnic background	39.7%	42.3%	67.9%	45.3%
Total		Count	73	78	28	179
		% within Ethnic background	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.948(a)	2	.031
Likelihood Ratio	6.992	2	.030
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.806	1	.028
N of Valid Cases	179		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12.67.

How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course * Do you receive EMA?

Crosstab

			Do you receive EMA?		Total
			Yes	No	
How financial support (e.g. EMA) motivates you to complete the course	Excellent or Good	Count	62	35	97
		% within Do you receive EMA?	62.6%	43.8%	54.2%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	37	45	82
		% within Do you receive EMA?	37.4%	56.3%	45.8%
Total		Count	99	80	179
		% within Do you receive EMA?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.351(b)	1	.012		
Continuity Correction(a)	5.613	1	.018		
Likelihood Ratio	6.377	1	.012		
Fisher's Exact Test				.016	.009
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.315	1	.012		
N of Valid Cases	179				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 36.65.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Communication

Providing information to help you make the right choice of course * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Providing information to help you make the right choice of course	Excellent or Good	Count	28	76	104
		% within Course level	36.4%	55.9%	48.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	49	60	109
		% within Course level	63.6%	44.1%	51.2%
Total		Count	77	136	213
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.496(b)	1	.006		
Continuity Correction(a)	6.736	1	.009		
Likelihood Ratio	7.570	1	.006		
Fisher's Exact Test				.007	.005
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.461	1	.006		
N of Valid Cases	213				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 37.60.

Explaining the content and requirements of your course * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Explaining the content and requirements of your course	Excellent or Good	Count	29	72	101
		% within Course level	38.2%	52.9%	47.6%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	47	64	111
		% within Course level	61.8%	47.1%	52.4%
Total		Count	76	136	212
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.272(b)	1	.039		
Continuity Correction(a)	3.699	1	.054		
Likelihood Ratio	4.303	1	.038		
Fisher's Exact Test				.045	.027
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.251	1	.039		
N of Valid Cases	212				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 36.21.

Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments) * College

Crosstab

			College		Total
			College A	College B	
Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments)	Excellent or Good	Count	41	62	103
		% within College	36.6%	61.4%	48.4%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	71	39	110
		% within College	63.4%	38.6%	51.6%
Total		Count	112	101	213
		% within College	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.057(b)	1	.000		
Continuity Correction(a)	12.084	1	.001		
Likelihood Ratio	13.188	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.996	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	213				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 48.84.

Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments) * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Giving you information about course matters (e.g. your timetable, classrooms, details about assignments)	Excellent or Good	Count	30	73	103
		% within Course level	38.5%	54.1%	48.4%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	48	62	110
		% within Course level	61.5%	45.9%	51.6%
Total		Count	78	135	213
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.825(b)	1	.028		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.220	1	.040		
Likelihood Ratio	4.859	1	.028		
Fisher's Exact Test				.033	.020
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.803	1	.028		
N of Valid Cases	213				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 37.72.

Informing you about any changes in the course * College

Crosstab

			College		Total
			College A	College B	
Informing you about any changes in the course	Excellent or Good	Count	26	36	62
		% within College	28.0%	42.4%	34.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	67	49	116
		% within College	72.0%	57.6%	65.2%
Total		Count	93	85	178
		% within College	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.055(b)	1	.044		
Continuity Correction(a)	3.445	1	.063		
Likelihood Ratio	4.065	1	.044		
Fisher's Exact Test				.059	.032
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.032	1	.045		
N of Valid Cases	178				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 29.61.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Teaching and Learning

How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons	Excellent or Good	Count	30	87	117
		% within Course level	38.0%	64.9%	54.9%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	49	47	96
		% within Course level	62.0%	35.1%	45.1%
Total		Count	79	134	213
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.581(b)	1	.000		
Continuity Correction(a)	13.513	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	14.665	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.513	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	213				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 35.61.

How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
How interesting and relevant to the subject area teachers make the lessons	Excellent or Good	Count	55	46	14	115
		% within Ethnic background	64.7%	52.3%	41.2%	55.6%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	30	42	20	92
		% within Ethnic background	35.3%	47.7%	58.8%	44.4%
Total		Count	85	88	34	207
		% within Ethnic background	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.114(a)	2	.047
Likelihood Ratio	6.148	2	.046
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.076	1	.014
N of Valid Cases	207		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.11.

How good teachers are at taking control of lessons * College

Crosstab

			College		Total
			College A	College B	
How good teachers are at taking control of lessons	Excellent or Good	Count	50	67	117
		% within College	44.6%	67.0%	55.2%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	62	33	95
		% within College	55.4%	33.0%	44.8%
Total		Count	112	100	212
		% within College	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.678(b)	1	.001		
Continuity Correction(a)	9.793	1	.002		
Likelihood Ratio	10.795	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.001	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.627	1	.001		
N of Valid Cases	212				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 44.81.

How good teachers are at taking control of lessons * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How good teachers are at taking control of lessons	Excellent or Good	Count	33	84	117
		% within Course level	42.3%	62.7%	55.2%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	45	50	95
		% within Course level	57.7%	37.3%	44.8%
Total		Count	78	134	212
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.279(b)	1	.004		
Continuity Correction(a)	7.476	1	.006		
Likelihood Ratio	8.288	1	.004		
Fisher's Exact Test				.004	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.240	1	.004		
N of Valid Cases	212				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 34.95.

How varied the teaching is (e.g. using different learning materials, different activities) * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How varied the teaching is (e.g. using different learning materials, different activities)	Excellent or Good	Count	26	87	113
		% within Course level	34.2%	64.4%	53.6%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	50	48	98
		% within Course level	65.8%	35.6%	46.4%
Total		Count	76	135	211
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.870(b)	1	.000		
Continuity Correction(a)	16.675	1	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	18.072	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.000	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	17.785	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	211				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 35.30.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Course assessment

How clear the assessment criteria are on individual assignments you are given * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How clear the assessment criteria are on individual assignments you are given	Excellent or Good	Count	33	78	111
		% within Course level	42.3%	59.5%	53.1%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	45	53	98
		% within Course level	57.7%	40.5%	46.9%
Total		Count	78	131	209
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.831(b)	1	.016		
Continuity Correction(a)	5.160	1	.023		
Likelihood Ratio	5.845	1	.016		
Fisher's Exact Test				.022	.012
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.803	1	.016		
N of Valid Cases	209				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 36.57.

How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work	Excellent or Good	Count	33	85	118
		% within Course level	42.3%	65.4%	56.7%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	45	45	90
		% within Course level	57.7%	34.6%	43.3%
Total		Count	78	130	208
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10.576(b)	1	.001		
Continuity Correction(a)	9.657	1	.002		
Likelihood Ratio	10.582	1	.001		
Fisher's Exact Test				.001	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.525	1	.001		
N of Valid Cases	208				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 33.75.

How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
How helpful teachers' feedback is on your course work	Excellent or Good	Count	58	41	17	116
		% within Ethnic background	68.2%	49.4%	50.0%	57.4%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	27	42	17	86
		% within Ethnic background	31.8%	50.6%	50.0%	42.6%
Total		Count	85	83	34	202
	% within Ethnic background		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.017(a)	2	.030
Likelihood Ratio	7.111	2	.029
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.261	1	.022
N of Valid Cases	202		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 14.48.

Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year (e.g. teachers talking to you, individual tutorials, Individual Learning Plan) * Do you receive EMA?

Crosstab

			Do you receive EMA?		Total
			Yes	No	
Being kept regularly informed about your progress throughout the year (e.g. teachers talking to you, individual tutorials, Individual Learning Plan)	Excellent or Good	Count	32	54	86
		% within Do you receive EMA?	32.0%	52.4%	42.4%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	68	49	117
		% within Do you receive EMA?	68.0%	47.6%	57.6%
Total		Count	100	103	203
		% within Do you receive EMA?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.671(b)	1	.003		
Continuity Correction(a)	7.855	1	.005		
Likelihood Ratio	8.746	1	.003		
Fisher's Exact Test				.004	.002
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.628	1	.003		
N of Valid Cases	203				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 42.36.

Being given the right amount of assessment and a reasonable amount of time in which to do it * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Being given the right amount of assessment and a reasonable amount of time in which to do it	Excellent or Good	Count	24	73	97
		% within Course level	30.8%	55.7%	46.4%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	54	58	112
		% within Course level	69.2%	44.3%	53.6%
Total		Count	78	131	209
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.243(b)	1	.000		
Continuity Correction(a)	11.260	1	.001		
Likelihood Ratio	12.485	1	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test				.001	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.184	1	.000		
N of Valid Cases	209				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 36.20.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Support

Tutorial support (one-to-one meetings with your teachers) * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
Tutorial support (one-to-one meetings with your teachers)	Excellent or Good	Count	46	39	9	94
		% within Ethnic background	54.1%	48.1%	27.3%	47.2%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	39	42	24	105
		% within Ethnic background	45.9%	51.9%	72.7%	52.8%
Total		Count	85	81	33	199
		% within Ethnic background	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.919(a)	2	.031
Likelihood Ratio	7.155	2	.028
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.914	1	.015
N of Valid Cases	199		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.59.

Support in using college learning facilities (e.g. library, computers) * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
Support in using college learning facilities (e.g. library, computers)	Excellent or Good	Count	55	43	13	111
		% within Ethnic background	65.5%	50.6%	41.9%	55.5%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	29	42	18	89
		% within Ethnic background	34.5%	49.4%	58.1%	44.5%
Total		Count	84	85	31	200
		% within Ethnic background	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.525(a)	2	.038
Likelihood Ratio	6.578	2	.037
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.320	1	.012
N of Valid Cases	200		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 13.80.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Environment

Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax * Gender

Crosstab

			Gender		Total
			Male	Female	
Good leisure facilities and places where students can socialise and relax	Excellent or Good	Count	47	21	68
		% within Gender	40.5%	24.7%	33.8%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	69	64	133
		% within Gender	59.5%	75.3%	66.2%
Total		Count	116	85	201
		% within Gender	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.478(b)	1	.019		
Continuity Correction(a)	4.795	1	.029		
Likelihood Ratio	5.587	1	.018		
Fisher's Exact Test				.024	.014
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.451	1	.020		
N of Valid Cases	201				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 28.76.

Security arrangements that make the college safe for students * Age

Crosstab

			Age		Total
			16-19	20+	
Security arrangements that make the college safe for students	Excellent or Good	Count	87	11	98
		% within Age	56.9%	33.3%	52.7%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	66	22	88
		% within Age	43.1%	66.7%	47.3%
Total		Count	153	33	186
		% within Age	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.029(b)	1	.014		
Continuity Correction(a)	5.122	1	.024		
Likelihood Ratio	6.091	1	.014		
Fisher's Exact Test				.020	.012
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.996	1	.014		
N of Valid Cases	186				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.61.

Security arrangements that make the college safe for students * Do you receive EMA?

Crosstab

			Do you receive EMA?		Total
			Yes	No	
Security arrangements that make the college safe for students	Excellent or Good	Count	62	47	109
		% within Do you receive EMA?	62.0%	45.2%	53.4%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	38	57	95
		% within Do you receive EMA?	38.0%	54.8%	46.6%
Total		Count	100	104	204
	% within Do you receive EMA?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.788(b)	1	.016		
Continuity Correction(a)	5.132	1	.023		
Likelihood Ratio	5.818	1	.016		
Fisher's Exact Test				.018	.012
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.760	1	.016		
N of Valid Cases	204				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table

b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 46.57.

Survey 2 - Ratings Cross-tabs: Quality Assurance

Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course * Ethnic background

Crosstab

			Ethnic background			Total
			Black	Asian	White and other backgorunds	
Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course	Excellent or Good	Count	46	27	9	82
		% within Ethnic background	55.4%	31.0%	26.5%	40.2%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	37	60	25	122
		% within Ethnic background	44.6%	69.0%	73.5%	59.8%
Total		Count	83	87	34	204
		% within Ethnic background	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.706(a)	2	.001
Likelihood Ratio	13.755	2	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	11.779	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	204		

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 13.67.

Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course * Do you receive EMA?

Crosstab

			Do you receive EMA?		
			Yes	No	Total
Opportunities for students to give teachers feedback on the teaching of the course	Excellent or Good	Count	31	51	82
		% within Do you receive EMA?	31.0%	48.6%	40.0%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	69	54	123
		% within Do you receive EMA?	69.0%	51.4%	60.0%
Total		Count	100	105	205
		% within Do you receive EMA?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.589(b)	1	.010		
Continuity Correction(a)	5.877	1	.015		
Likelihood Ratio	6.639	1	.010		
Fisher's Exact Test				.011	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.557	1	.010		
N of Valid Cases	205				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 40.00.

Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints * Do you receive EMA?

Crosstab

			Do you receive EMA?		Total
			Yes	No	
Effective response by college staff to resolve student complaints	Excellent or Good	Count	23	38	61
		% within Do you receive EMA?	23.7%	36.9%	30.5%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	74	65	139
		% within Do you receive EMA?	76.3%	63.1%	69.5%
Total		Count	97	103	200
		% within Do you receive EMA?	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.095(b)	1	.043		
Continuity Correction(a)	3.497	1	.061		
Likelihood Ratio	4.130	1	.042		
Fisher's Exact Test				.047	.030
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.074	1	.044		
N of Valid Cases	200				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 29.59.

Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course (e.g. student reps) * Course level

Crosstab

			Course level		Total
			level 2	level 3	
Opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making about the course (e.g. student reps)	Excellent or Good	Count	13	46	59
		% within Course level	17.1%	34.6%	28.2%
	Satisfactory to Very Poor	Count	63	87	150
		% within Course level	82.9%	65.4%	71.8%
Total		Count	76	133	209
		% within Course level	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.295(b)	1	.007		
Continuity Correction(a)	6.457	1	.011		
Likelihood Ratio	7.678	1	.006		
Fisher's Exact Test				.007	.005
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.260	1	.007		
N of Valid Cases	209				

a Computed only for a 2x2 table
b 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 21.45.

Appendix 11 Students' ratings of how effectively each of the 9 retention strategies was being implemented

(Mean ratings shown are composite figures derived from each of the 5 items corresponding to each strategy)

Ratings (on a 1 to 5 scale) of how effectively the 9 different strategies are being implemented: College comparisons

STRATEGY	COLLEGE 'A' MEAN RATING	COLLEGE 'A' RANK	COLLEGE 'B' MEAN RATING	COLLEGE 'B' RANK	*MEAN RATING (COMBINED)*	*OVERALL RANK*
Motivation factors	**2.39**	1	**2.07**	1	*2.24*	*1*
Teaching and learning	**2.64**	2	**2.34**	2	*2.50*	*2*
Induction	**2.66**	4	**2.42**	3	*2.54*	*3*
Course assessment	**2.65**	3	**2.47**	4=	*2.57*	*4*
Course management	**2.87**	6	**2.50**	6	*2.70*	*5*
Communication	**2.93**	7	**2.47**	4=	*2.71*	*6*
College support	**2.81**	5	**2.68**	8	*2.75*	*7*
College environment	**2.95**	8	**2.63**	7	*2.81*	*8*
Quality assurance	**3.04**	9	**2.87**	9	*2.96*	*9*

APPENDIX 12: Questions for interviews with students

1. Why did you choose to do this course?

2. What did the college do to make sure that this is the right course for you?

3. In what ways does the college support you with your learning?

4. Do you feel well connected to your course tutors and the college generally?

5. How well organised is your course?

6. How good are your course teachers at motivating you to do well on the course?

7. Has there ever been a point when you thought that you might not complete this course?

If yes:
Why?

What made you decide to stay and continue with the course?

8. What more could be done by the college or your course teachers to help you stay and complete the course?

9. What do you think the college can do to help more students stay and complete their courses?

Thank you for taking part in this survey.
Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu (Doctorate Student, University of Greenwich)

Appendix 13 - Questions for Interviews with Staff

1. Do you have an idea as to why your students chose to do this course?

2. What did the college do to make sure that this is the right course for student?

3. In what ways does the college support students with their learning?

4. Do you feel well that students are well connected to their course tutors and the college generally?

5. How well organised is your course?

6. How good are course teachers at motivating students to do well on their course?

7. Has there ever been a point when you thought that a student might not complete a course?

If yes:
Why?

8. What is your view to why a student may decide to stay and complete a course?

9. What more could be done by the course teachers to help students stay and complete their course?

10. What do you think the college can do to help more students stay and complete their course?

Thank you for taking part in this survey.
Elizabeth Achinewhu-Nworgu (Doctorate Student, University of Greenwich)