

'Successful' students: exploring the factors that encourage and enable students from widening participation backgrounds to stay the course

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#successfulstudents

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Background to Research: Widening Participation in Higher Education

- Government set goals on widening participation in higher education: by 2020 double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university, and increase the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students going to university by 20% (BIS, 2016).
- Annual “access agreements”: set out how universities/colleges sustain or improve access for underrepresented groups. Estimated £833.5 million spend to support access, student success and progression in 2017/8 and £860.1 million in 2018/19.
- Need for universities to better evaluate their activities: currently little publicly available evidence on the effectiveness of programmes.

Widening Participation in Higher Education

- Increasing emphasis upon determining the effectiveness of widening participation (WP) interventions, both in England and internationally (Thomas, 2012).
- Student attrition is one of the biggest concerns in HE. Research focusses on determining the causes and experiences of withdrawal.
- For full-time degree entrants in 2015/2016, the non-continuation rate was 6.1% (Overall)
- Limited research on what enables WP students to progress through their degree programme successfully.
- Still not clear which factors are important and what institutions and policy makers should be doing to promote success (McKendry, Wright and Stevenson, 2014).
- Growing need to understand the perspectives of those students who successfully negotiate their programme of study.

Brunel University London and Widening Participation



- Strong and long tradition of WP at Brunel University London
- Very diverse student population
- 62% BME
- Over 35% of University's current undergraduate students are in receipt of a Full Maintenance Grant
- Definition of WP - Brunel uses the following definition for reporting and targeted support as those students with any one or more of the following characteristics:
 - Being in receipt of full maintenance loan for the year (income less than £25,000)
 - Students from low participation neighbourhoods (defined by POLAR 3, Quantile 1)
- Under this definition, the widening participation cohort at Brunel for 2015-16 is 40% of the student population

Brunel University London and Widening Participation

- Innovative WP interventions: Urban Scholars and HeadStart
- Strong position to make a significant contribution and help ‘solve’ the bigger picture
- Given the success of WP at Brunel, an evidence-base is needed to elucidate what encourages and enables WP students to complete their degrees and what needs to be done to more effectively support WP students during their studies



Aims of Research

- To explore what encourages and enables WP students to complete their course of study and to develop recommendations and guidelines in order to support and retain them

Objectives

- Investigate the factors that students understand to have had a positive impact on their ability to complete their studies
- Investigate the issues students have faced while at Brunel and the types of support they have drawn on
- Recommend ideas, policies and practices the University could use to better support these students and increase retention rates and enhance progression

Research Design

Research started in February 2017 and is ongoing. It involves two phases of primary data collection:

1. Online questionnaire with students from a WP background
 2. In-depth interviews with a sample of up to 30 students from a WP background
- Photo diaries
 - Student profile films

Research Design

- Targeted students from across all three colleges at Brunel:
 - College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences
 - College of Engineering, Design and Physical Sciences
 - College of Health and Life Sciences

Preliminary Findings: Respondents (Online Survey)

- 135 responses to date
- 99 female and 35 male
- 1 'prefer not to say'

Route into University

- 20 BTEC
- 12 Access Course
- 2 HND
- 76 other (namely A-Levels)

Preliminary Findings: Respondents (Online Survey)

- 59 in receipt of a Full Maintenance Grant
- 12 Registered Disabled
- 17 were/are a ‘looked after child’ (up to 25 years of age)
- 23 have caring responsibilities
- 7 have dependent children
- All full-time students

Preliminary Findings: Problems (Online Survey)

Students have experienced the following problems during the course of their degree:

- Lack of motivation – **49.5%**
- Lack of confidence – **42.8%**
- Financially supporting their studies – **40.9%**
- Balancing paid employment/study – **40%**
- Feeling isolated / of not belonging – **38.1%**
- Attending classes – **36.1%**

Preliminary Findings: Support (Online Survey)

Students have felt they needed additional support in the following areas:

- Meeting coursework deadlines – **60.7%**
- Examinations – **51.9%**
- Start of their degree – **33.3%**
- Student Placements – **27.3%**



Preliminary Findings: Services (Online Survey)

Students aware of the following available services:

- Library – **90.3%**
- Counselling – **87.5%**
- The Academic Skills Service (ASK) – **85.5%**
- Student Union – **72.1%**
- Chaplaincies – **38.4%**
- Student Welfare – **31.7%**
- Access to Learning Fund – **16.3%**



Preliminary Findings: Enabling Factors (Online Survey)

Students primarily identified **personal factors** for enabling and encouraging them to get to this point in their studies

- ‘Personal’ Factors (Motivation, character, etc.) – **92.3%**
- Personal Support (Family, partner, children, friends, peer etc.) – **79.05%**
- Institutional Support (Staff, university services, etc.) – **36.1%**

“Perseverance to the finish line”

“Department have been very flexible but very difficult to get things agreed”.

“Support provided by placement providers”

Preliminary Findings: Suggestions (Online Survey)

Participants felt the following would help students like them complete their degree at Brunel:

- Greater variety of study/social spaces on campus – **63.8%**
- Receiving timetable earlier in the year – **61.9%**
- More regular one-to-one contact with tutor – **56.1%**
- Support and guidance from staff – **51.4%**
- Mentoring scheme – **43.8%**
- Counselling and confidence building skills – **38.1%**



Preliminary Findings: Respondents (Interviews)

- 13 in-depth interviews conducted to date
- 11 female and 2 male

5 Key Preliminary Findings

1. Timetabling – Key Finding

Students would like to see more flexibility with timetabling – avoid timetabling lectures at the very start and end of the day, and keep childcare/caring responsibilities in mind when issuing the timetable.

“...being able to pre-plan. And again, that all boils down to communication. Communication is key, it really is a crucial enabler of better engaging students, which will lead to their better success.”

2. Social Spaces and belonging – Key Finding

Students would like to see more social spaces available on campus where they can meet, interact, study, relax with friends and form friendships away from commercial settings and environments.

“It would be very helpful if there were more spaces for independent learning other than the library”

“Very few places to sit and relax without having to buy something - which is a nightmare when you don't live on campus / have to drive in for lectures.”

“The student kitchen is great, but maybe a bigger space for off campus students to eat home food/hang out. Perhaps more options for mature students who live with a partner (in relation to halls and living).”

3. Supportive University Services – Key Finding

Students are largely positive about those university services that are specifically designed to support the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Counselling
- WP programmes and services
- Mentoring Scheme
- PAL (Peer Assisted Learning)
- Disability and Dyslexia Service”

“The counselling has really helped me in my final year.”

“..the university as a whole has some really great services, like I was diagnosed with dyslexia, so I've had support with, from the Dyslexia service, that's been great.”

“...you get allocated a study skills tutor. My first year was amazing, she taught me strategies and techniques and they've stayed with me ever since.”

4 . Support across the student lifecycle – Key Finding

University services and staff such as student welfare and counselling, academics, personal tutors, work-place mentors, peer-buddies and peer role models, are vital across the student lifecycle and key to the completion of their degrees, along with families and friends.

- University Services
- Staff – academics/personal tutors
- Work-place mentors
- Peer buddies/peer role models
- Families and friends

“I have struck up a number of good relationships with academics at Brunel and the career and placement support staff, so I think you know that of course [it] increases engagement”.

“...I've got tremendous support from my family and friends who all want the best for me” .

“I highly recommend it [mentoring]. It's really useful because I asked for a female in the tech industry and I got exactly what I wanted. You're learning from these people and they're willing to help you.

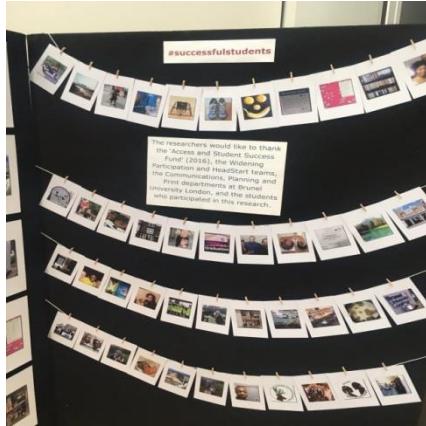
5. Feeling part of a community – Key Finding

Students have identified that feeling part of a community where they experience positive relationships that encourage a sense of belonging is critical to them.

“it’s all about people feeling comfortable in their environment.”

“I think also what enabled me to get to this stage is some of my lectures at my university.”

“So a mix of, a lot of like supportive people who feel you can achieve your aspirations, as well as a mix of...I think it's generally a friendly environment at Brunel, so it's one of these things where it's, it doesn't feel like you're fighting to try to get your degree, you're just, it's challenging but it's not like they're trying to kick you down, they're actually trying to help you get through it, which is nice.”



Questions?

