Retention and Progression Strategy

Purpose of the Strategy

The University is committed to achieving the highest possible rates of student retention and progression, because this is manifestly in the best interests of our students as well as of the University. The University Strategy to 2017 also commits the University to ‘seek out and support entrants with high potential from non-traditional backgrounds who may not have high qualifications’. Student retention and progression rates are therefore a Key Performance Indicator under the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy to 2017, accompanied by a number of detailed Performance Indicators, including ones relating to students from less privileged backgrounds. The Learning and Teaching Strategy accordingly has as an explicit aim to ‘develop support systems and academic tutoring and advisory procedures to help all students to make full use of appropriate academic and pastoral support, through all the routes available’ (Sub Aim 1.6).

Retention and progression rates are also a key priority of the Scottish Funding Council, and in consequence the University has made specific commitments with regard to student retention and progression in its Outcome Agreements with the SFC. In view of this, the University has established a Retention and Progression Sub-Committee of the Learning and Teaching Committee, and tasked it with the development of a new Retention and Progression Strategy and Action Plan, whose purpose is to ensure that the University meets and if possible exceeds institutional and Outcome Agreement targets in relation to retention and progression for students in general, and for specific groups of students from less privileged backgrounds in particular.

Principles Underpinning the Strategy

This strategy has been developed with reference to important recent research in the sector, most notably the ‘What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme’, a three-year, £1million programme initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England between 2008 and 2011 (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/what-works-retention).

The main recommendation from the programme is that universities should aim to nurture a culture of belonging within the academic and social community. Rather than advocating a targeted approach aimed at specific groups of students, the programme report emphasises the importance of focusing on developing activities that all students participate in.

The programme identified the academic sphere as the most important site for nurturing participation and engendering belonging. While effective engagement by academic Schools in developing activities for all students designed to improve retention and progression is therefore vital, another key element is the role that both DUSA and the University’s support services can and do play in nurturing a sense of belonging at the University. This strategy is therefore underpinned by the belief that all parts of the University must work together to maximise student retention and progression of all students. This Strategy therefore aligns well with the University’s Transformation Vision and Strategy, most notably with our core values of valuing people, working together, and making a difference.

Developing a Sense of Academic Belonging

According to the ‘What Works?’ programme, student belonging is achieved through:

- supportive peer relations
- meaningful interactions between staff and students
- developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful university learners
Belonging should be encouraged through active student engagement, across the institution but especially in the academic sphere through student-centred learning and teaching which in turn promotes social integration. Engagement and belonging is especially important at an early stage. The most effective interventions start pre-entry, and have an overt academic purpose, often developing peer networks and friendships, creating links with academic members of staff, providing key information, shaping realistic expectations, improving academic skills, developing students’ confidence, demonstrating future relevance, and nurturing belonging.

The University’s DUAL Summer School programme fulfils all of these functions, and it is therefore not by chance that there is strong evidence that DUAL has positive effects on retention and progression, and why it is a core element of the University’s Retention and Progression Strategy. DUAL is targeted at applicants who have been most disadvantaged, identified in accordance with the University’s contextual admissions policy. The University has appointed a Transitions Officer to support students articulating from the College sector. This role is tasked with developing a sense of belonging to the University, through a series of interventions, prior to and during the transition from College to University. The University also offers a range of centrally-provided academic support services that students can access on an optional basis (or when advised by their academic School) throughout their studies (e.g. the Academic Skills Centre and the Library & Learning Centre).

But mindful of the principle that mainstream activities which involve all students are particularly effective, all academic Schools should ensure that their arrangements from pre-entry, through induction and the first year programme are designed as conscious interventions for all students with a view to fostering a sense of belonging in ways described above. Schools should also ensure that a strong sense of cohort identity and belonging is fostered, with particular attention paid to the reintegration of students who spend time away from University on work placement or study elsewhere, or repeat year students. Consideration should also be given to implementing other peer support mechanisms for students, such as buddy schemes. Subject-based student societies should also be encouraged and supported by academic Schools in partnership with DUSA, as these help foster relationships outside timetabled teaching events, bringing together students of all year groups from within a subject or School and beyond.

There is strong evidence that students are particularly likely to consider leaving University during their first semester and immediately after Christmas. Academic Schools should also be mindful that the first assessment is also a key trigger point, especially if that assessment is summative and carries significant weight in the overall assessment pattern of the module. Assessment strategies for first year modules should therefore be designed if possible to include less daunting formative assessment tasks early on in the semester, which ideally should incorporate elements of group or peer assessment designed to foster peer relations and a sense of a learning community to which all students (and staff) belong.

There is also a clear correlation between poor attendance and/or failure to submit assignments on the one hand, and poor retention and progression on the other, and strong evidence that effective monitoring arrangements allied to prompt intervention can have a very positive impact on rates of retention and progression. All Schools should therefore ensure that they have in place rigorous monitoring procedures, and respond quickly to evidence of disengagement. In view of the importance of this issue, the Retention and Progression Committee has agreed that all Schools should be encouraged to monitor attendance at all teaching events, including lectures, in the first year at least.

Schools should also ensure that they have in place effective arrangements to provide academic advice and support for students, and that at the same time all staff can also advise students effectively about the support services that the University and DUSA provide. To this end DUSA and the University are currently jointly conducting a review of policy and guidance to Schools regarding Advisers of Studies/Personal Tutors and will bring forward recommendations and guidance on good practice. The University’s support services such as the Academic Skills Centre and the Careers and Enterprise Hub
are most effective where Schools have developed a strong partnership approach with those services, and all Schools should therefore foster this partnership approach. Schools should ensure that all staff in the School are aware of the University’s aspirations to improve retention and progression rates, and that efforts of staff designed to improve retention and progression are appropriately recognised (not least in workload allocation models), celebrated and rewarded.

Developing a Sense of Social and Community Belonging

DUSA and the University’s support services have a key role to play in fostering a strong sense of social and community as well as academic belonging.

As one of the most active and successful student associations in the UK, DUSA makes a major contribution to the creation of a sense of belonging. It does this in multiple ways, not least through the many student societies it organises, the Sports Union and over 40 separate sports clubs, and its four media outlets. DUSA also has highly effective systems of student representation from class reps right up to the Student Representative Council and the Student Executive to ensure that students are well represented and can be supported whatever their needs are. The Executive is especially well placed to guide and advise on all matters from welfare issues, academic appeals, complaints, housing, volunteering, finance and more. DUSA also regularly runs welfare campaigns in collaboration with Student Services for the benefit of students, some of which are designed to support students in achieving their full potential academically, such as the exam stress campaign. Finally, DUSA runs the most successful Students’ Union in Scotland and in the top 10 in the UK, offering outstanding social facilities where students can meet, debate and relax. The University will continue to support DUSA to ensure that it continues to expand its major contribution to student wellbeing and to the fostering of social and community belonging.

DUSA works closely with the University’s support services to foster a sense of social and community belonging. This partnership approach will be enhanced through the creation of a new unified Enquiry Centre located in the Student’s Union building to provide a clear and highly accessible entry point for main campus students to all key sources of support. A number of external agencies (e.g. Citizens’ Advice Bureau) will also operate from the centre. The ‘stay on course’ triage referral system will be central to the operation of the centre thus ensuring students’ needs are much more swiftly identified and appropriately dealt with. DUSA and Student Services also jointly run welcome activities which will continue to extend into both semesters and offer a very wide range of all-comer and bespoke information and social events.

The University, through Student Services and other agencies, provides a range of support services – including Counselling, the University Health Service, the Nursery, Pastoral Support, Disability Services, and the Chaplaincy. The University has recently established a Student Experience Operations Group to bring together the Directors of all support services as well as the President of DUSA to ensure coordination of the development and enhancement of all non-School-based support services.

The University also recognises that financial difficulties may be a barrier to student retention and progression. The Student Funding Unit (SFU) is the primary source of funding support on campus, and runs a financial capability education programme to raise student awareness about finance and debt, with special emphasis on the avoidance of payday loans. The greater signposting of financial aid via the Enquiry Centre and better marketing of the SFU will help ensure students whose retention is at risk on financial grounds will receive the help they need.

Part-time jobs, volunteering and placements which complement but not displace engagement with the student’s academic programme of study can play a major part in fostering a sense of belonging to the wider Dundee and Tayside community as well as providing opportunity to earn money. The University will continue to operate The Job Shop in partnership with DUSA and Peer Connections and seek through its Employability, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Strategy to promote to students the
value of their academic studies as well as other extracurricular activities for future employability, thereby motivating them to complete their studies successfully.

**Monitoring the Effectiveness of the Strategy**

The University has established a number of targets in relation to retention and progression. As these are contained in the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy and Outcome Agreements, they are not repeated here. Progress against these targets is monitored annually and reported to the Senior Management Team, Learning and Teaching Committee, Senate and Court, as well as the SFC. Retention and progression are also a focus of the University’s annual monitoring and period review processes. The University has recently made significant progress in improving the quantity, quality and accessibility of data in order to monitor progress across targets. Nevertheless there is further work to be done to enhance our capacity and capability to track students so as to be able not only to monitor progress against university targets, but also to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions at School or subject level. Part of the remit of the Retention and Progression Committee is to coordinate the generation and analysis of datasets, to identify excellent practice within the University and across the sector, and to promote its adoption across the University.

The Action Plan (still to be finalised) details the specific actions which will be undertaken in order to deliver the Strategy. The Action Plan will be kept under constant review by the Retention and Progression Committee, and will be incorporated into the overall Action Plan under the University’s Metastrategy for Quality Enhancement, which brings together action planning across the full range of activities designed to enhance all aspects of learning, teaching and the wider student experience at the University.

Approved by Senate May 2014

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