The impact of negative experiences, dissatisfaction and attachment on first year undergraduate withdrawal

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Abstract : This paper reports the results of a telephone survey of 151 undergraduates who withdrew in their first year of study at post-1992 institution. It focuses on the negative experiences which they reported during their time at the university and the ultimate reasons for leaving, exploring in particular issues around choice of course, academic experience, socialisation and financial support. From this data and from demographic information held by the university, distinct groupings of similar cases emerge, going some way to illuminating which students leave, when and why. The paper concludes with a discussion around the relationship between dissatisfaction, attachment and student retention, proposing that negative stimuli only go part of the way to explaining withdrawal decisions.

1. Context and methodology

The causes and consequences of student withdrawal has grown into a significant issue in higher education over the last ten years, with a series of governmental and not-for-profit sector reports probing the topic (e.g. Yorke et al, 1997; SCEE, 2001; NAO, 2002; HEFCE, 2003; Quinn et al, 2005). Concern has variously been expressed in terms of differential access to education, wastage of potential, social justice, value-for-money for taxpayers, students' decision-making mechanisms and the effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms. Thomas (2002) has alluded to an underlying assumption in the literature – academic, governmental and journalistic – that an influx of non-traditional students into higher education has directly or indirectly caused problems with early withdrawal. Meanwhile, the present Government (DfES, 2003) has a expressed desire to "bear down" on student withdrawal. Questions therefore naturally arise as to which students are leaving early and why.

1.1 Models of student withdrawal

The majority of existing literature on student retention focuses on trying to identify either (a) which students are more predisposed to withdrawal, or (b) the reasons why students have withdrawn. In essence, this provides a *predictive model* and a *explanatory model*.

- The *predictive model* has, over time, proved largely unsuccessful. The only universal and reliable indicator of risk is a student's prior academic achievement (Smith & Naylor, 2000; Johnston, 2000; SCEE, 2001; NAO, 2002; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). There is some consensus that mature students (NAO, 2002; HEFCE, 2003), those entering a second choice course (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997; Baxter & Hatt, 2000; Johnston, 2000) and those joining their course late (Bennett, 2003) are also more prone to withdrawal. Evidence on whether students from non-traditional backgrounds have higher withdrawal rates than their traditional peers is equivocal at best (e.g. SCEE, 2001; UCAS, 2002; NAO, 2002). Lowe & Cook's (2002) work suggests that those students expressing anxiety prior to entry were those more prone to early withdrawal.

- The *explanatory model* has been more successful, with some degree of consensus over students' reported reasons for withdrawal, albeit hampered by recording methods within institutions. Studies (e.g. Yorke et al, 1997; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003) have suggested that poor decision making, problems with socialisation and academic difficulty are the main prompts to withdrawal. The role which financial circumstances play in student retention is more controversial, with some studies placing high importance on it (Yorke et al, 1997; Bennett, 2003), while others see it as a relatively minor component (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997).

This paper reports a study within a single institution which attempts to marry the two models, combining demographic details drawn from the university's student records system with qualitative interview data from withdrawn students.

1.2 Research context

The study took place in a large multi-site post-1992 university with a range of selecting and recruiting programmes, mostly with a vocational angle. The university is based five miles outside a large city which serves as the regional capital. Most first year students live in halls of residence in the city centre, with smaller numbers in campus-based accommodation or private lettings. With a substantial mature population (and a growing number of local students), a significant minority are based in the family home within commuting distance.

Student recruitment has a distinctly regional flavour with around two thirds of students being drawn from within 50 miles. The student population is slightly more affluent than the national average, with around 50% paying their own tuition fees, although there are significant numbers of non-traditional students, particularly drawn from the immediate area. The first year withdrawal rate is stable at around 12% (e.g. HEFCE, 2003). Previous cohort analysis (Hatt et al, 2003) concluded that students from low income backgrounds were no more likely to withdraw during the first year than their peers.

1.3 Methodology

The university's student records system was used to identify the 249 full-time UK undergraduates from the 2002/03 entry cohort who had been recorded as withdrawing between October 2002 and April 2003 (i.e. within their first two terms). This study aimed to interview the whole population by telephone in order to collect a broad, if relatively shallow, array of data.

Contact with each student was limited by resources to around 15 minutes. A short structured questionnaire was developed using open questioning around the student's motivations, expectations and experiences. A piloting exercise demonstrated that this was an approach which students were comfortable with and nearly all consented to having their interviews taped. Interviews took place between March and July 2003 and were scheduled to occur at least three months after a student's departure. This was both to provide time for reflection and to avoid the appearance that the interview was an attempt to persuade them to return. A maximum of three attempts were made to contact each student.

After omitting those who declined to be interviewed, those who could not be contacted and those who had known sensitive reasons for withdrawal (e.g. bereavement), a total of 151 valid interviews took place. This

represents 61% of the original population. It should be remembered that this population was itself a subset of first year withdrawals and did not include those leaving over the examination period or between academic years. Background data on the students (e.g. on gender and tuition fee liability) was drawn from the University's student record system

2. Results and interpretation

This paper focuses particularly on the experiences reported by the interviewees and the reasons for their withdrawal, particularly in reference to demographic factors and their pathways into higher education.

Students were specifically asked if they had had any negative experiences during their time at university, with follow-up prompts around finance, personal difficulties and course-related experiences if these were not mentioned. The open responses were coded *post hoc* into 22 categories, with most students reporting experiences in more than one category.

Students were also asked to identify a single primary reason for leaving and these were coded into eight mutually exclusive categories. Responses to questions relating to students' motivation for higher education and the reasons for their choice of university were also recorded and coded.

[Table 1 here]

The chi-squared test has been used to establish relationships between variables, with those achieving significance at the 95% level being reported in this paper.

3. Course-related experiences

Nearly half of all interviewees reported withdrawing for reasons relating to their course. The majority of these (34%) framed their experiences in terms of having made the wrong choice, with the remainder (14%) feeling that the problems were rooted in the university's academic provision. In reality, these rationalisations tended to overlap, with students using similar explanations to portray different reasons for withdrawal.

A number of authors (e.g. SCEE, 2001; NAO, 2002; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Parmar & Trotter, 2004; Quinn et al, 2005) have highlighted the importance of effective academic induction and adaptation to independent learning as key to their future success, and this study provides significant support for these findings.

3.1 Induction and early support

Difficulties around induction into the academic environment (p=0.007) and early teaching and support (p=0.009) were significantly more likely to be mentioned by those students entering with a strong motivation for their chosen subject area :

"I was expecting something in the post beforehand … so I could prepare more and know what the subjects were and an opportunity to do some background reading." (Male, aged 46, left in November, studying Chemistry, now considering Open University).

Even amongst selecting courses, where students were typically entering with strong entry qualifications, a number of students ran into difficulty early in their studies and were not able to find the support that they felt they needed :

"I had a problem with [one module], purely because I felt the lecturer didn't go into enough detail. It was very confusing, it wasn't sort of followed through enough [and] it was all just thrown at us and we were expected to understand it… I mean the language lecturers use is completely different to stuff you've been used to." (Female, 19, October, Law, working and considering Open University).

"I thought that there wasn't hardly any help if you couldn't get on with what you were doing. You didn't feel like you could ask any questions… I felt that they talked about stuff and didn't actually explain it." (Female, 19, March, Psychology, working and studying part-time in related subject).

3.2 Independent learning and gradual disengagement

In all, difficulties with what might broadly be described as 'independent learning' were mentioned by 15% of respondents :

It's a different way of learning than at college, [they] leave it to yourself really because there was only 10 hours a week in university. The rest was 'do it yourself', so I'd been used to a full timetable so I didn't really know what to do with all my free time." (Female, 18, November, Media Studies, considering return to a course with higher contact time).

One student used the opportunity of the interview to explain in some detail how he and his friends had, over a period of time, begun to struggle with one aspect of his studies, despite the fact that he was doing well elsewhere. He had entered the university through a vocational pathway and was highly motivated by the course and the career path ahead of it. However, he focused particularly on his experiences in one module :

"We sort of struggled on and struggled on. A group of my friends all absolutely hated it and stopped going, which just made things worse for me because I really wanted to make a go of it. I gave up at the end of December going to practicals because there was simply no point. I would sit there looking at a computer and just think 'Oh my god, what's going on?'". (Male, 19, February, Engineering, going to different university on different course).

Quinn et al (2005) describe this phenomenon as 'student drift', seeing a gradual disengagement linked to a lack of early formative assessment. The *Paving the Way* report (UCAS, 2002) found that this dissonance with independent learning was most common amongst students with qualifications other than A Levels, while Forsyth & Furlong (2003) attach it more closely with non-traditional students in the round. However, this study found that this response was distributed across all backgrounds and entry routes.

3.3 Non-traditional entry qualifications

Students entering with qualifications other than A Levels tended to experience particularly problems with the teaching environment in higher education ($p=0.007$), which was at odds with that experienced previously. This particularly manifested itself in relation to the size of the cohort and the level of support that staff were able to provide :

"It was like you were thrown in at the deep end. You'd come from the kind of close knit, like help at hand [at college], and then it's like this giant leap." (Female, 19, February, Drama, considering entry to specialist college).

"The class sizes were really big and so they didn't have much time anyway and then even when I did manage to get time to speak to [lecturing staff], they didn't really seem that interested." (Male, 19, October, Electronic Engineering, transferred to same course at different university).

There was also a degree of disappointment about the content of courses, which did not appear to them to follow a logical progression from their previous studies. At the time of interview, many of students from vocational backgrounds were planning to enter further education colleges (e.g. at HND level) or had passed into full-time work.

4. Choice of course

Around a third of interviewees could not identify a strong reason for entering higher education in relation to career paths or employability. Instead, they tended to explain that university seemed like the natural progression alongside their peer group or that they were seeking a general experience. These students tended to be from higher income households (p=0.039), but they had not generally visited their university, attended an open day or undertaken significant pre-entry research.

This group was prone to experiencing problems when the course was not as they had expected it to be (p=0.008), with some expressing this in terms of delivery, content or scope; e.g. too broad, not practical enough or too IT based :

"I'm not that mathematically-minded unfortunately, so the course was a bit of a surprise. I could have done more to find out about it really." (Male, 19, February, Engineering, uncertain plans).

The vast majority of these students were intending to return to higher education to pursue a different course, often at the same university. Others were more general and reflective about their original process of choosing, realising retrospectively that they had not considered the options available to them :

"The course, I should have looked into a little bit more, to be fair… I didn't quite know what I was getting myself into… I think if I chose a different course but if it was taught the same way as it was, I'd be fine." (Male, 18, December, Architecture, returning to same university on different course).

"I think I rushed into choosing which university. I wanted to go and I hadn't been to an open day or anything, so I think the course just wasn't what I expected." (Female, 18, December, Media Studies, moving to different university on a more practical course).

These students corresponded quite closely with the concept of a 'middle class drift' reported by other authors (e.g. Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Harrison, 2000; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Yorke & Longden, 2004), where academic and career considerations are secondary to the desire to study in a lively environment or to remain within peer groups.

5. Settling into the university community

27% of the sample gave what might broadly be categorised as personal or social reasons for leaving early. These included issues around homesickness, difficulties settling into the university community, dissonance with urban living, illness and bereavement.

For some students, being away from home was a sufficient single motivator to leave, often speaking positively about the course or the university in general. These students tended to leave early in the year and were returning to higher education nearer to the parental home :

"I just didn't like it away from home… I'm in [another] university studying law now. [It's] nearer to home. I travel every day; I commute now." (Female, 18, February, Law, transferred to same course at different university).

"[I didn't settle in] very well at all. I think it was just homesickness and university life wasn't really what I'd been expecting… I'm going back to university in September, but locally." (Male, 18, October, Joint Honours, returning to related course at different university).

Homesickness was particularly prevalent amongst students who had selected university specifically for its location at a what was perceived to be a reasonable distance (typified as "far enough, but not too far") from the family home (p=0.028). Yorke's (2002) finding that female students were markedly more likely to have negative experiences around integrating into the university community was replicated (p=0.009). It was particularly strong when the student felt that they were unable to build strong social networks early in their studies :

"I sort of didn't immerse myself into the whole lifestyle straight away, you know, like I should have." (Female, 19, May, Business, working).

"I had trouble settling in, to tell you the truth. I really miss [home city]. I'd done my art foundation year here and I really love it here. I think I just missed it – there was nothing wrong with anything to tell you the truth." (Female, 19, October, Art, less practical course at local university).

For some students, homesickness and the upheaval of moving away to university was part of a wider network of negative experiences which compounded to make their situation intolerable for them.

"I didn't enjoy the course much at all and although I liked some of the university, it seemed quite out in the sticks… I was [on campus]… I think I was quite homesick, I didn't enjoy my course at all and most of the people on my course commuted everyday, so I didn't really get a chance to meet very many people on my course." (Female, 19, October, Geography, transferred to different university on related practical course).

The university has a strong record of recruitment from rural areas and this was reflected in the experiences of several students who identified this as the source of their unhappiness :

"I was very much in two minds before I actually went whether to go, whether not to go, whether to join the family farm and everything and I got there – I'm a bit of a home bird – and just wanted to come home." (Male, 19, October, Estate Management, working).

Interestingly, and in contrast to some previous studies, very few students expressed dissatisfaction with the university environment (Ozga & Sukhnanan, 1998; Lowe & Cook, 2003) or cultural dissonance with its 'habitus' (Thomas, 2002).   Instead, their reasons for leaving were internalised and focused on their own position (or absence of one) within their peer community.

6. Financial issues

The 23% of interviewees reporting financial difficulties were significantly more likely to have chosen the university for its location in a lively city (p=0.024), while those withdrawing for this reason were predominantly male (p=0.012) and from low income households (p=0.024). Financial difficulties tended to be mutually exclusive to other negative experiences.

6.1 Financial support

Of the fourteen individuals specifically withdrawing for financial reasons, the most common narrative was of not getting the expected financial support from their families, or, in one case, having it withdrawn midway through the year :

> *"When I came to university I had financial support from my parents as well as my loan but as I went through, I'd become independent from my parents and I no longer received support from them. That's why I had to drop out."* (Male, 19, March, Engineering, working and considering possible future return to university).

Estimates nationally for the proportion of students receiving reduced support from their families vary around one third (e.g. Hesketh, 1999; Callender & Kemp, 2000; Christie et al, 2001). The students in this study had attempted to live frugally, but generally found that they were compelled to take on paid work in order to make ends meet, placing pressure on their studies (Hutchings, 2003; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Hunt et al, 2004; Quinn et al, 2005) :

"I was financing myself through university and I found it very difficult because I was attempting to work full time, while at university and it was absolutely impossible to get to lectures on time." (Male, 19, November, Social Science, working and considering returning to a different subject).

Three students withdrew after being derailed by circumstances beyond their control, one being a victim of crime and another losing their job. The third situation illustrated a particular issue for mature students :

"I'm a single mother. I live in housing association accommodation and I was under the impression I could come to university and that my rent would still be paid. I'd already handed all my books into the social security and I wondered why I was having no money for 3 weeks, 4 weeks. I had to start borrowing from people. I found out then that they were writing to me saying my rent was in arrears and I just panicked." (Female, 27, October, Law, returning to college and considering possible return to university in the future)

It was apparent from the details given in the interview that the student had been incorrectly advised about her benefit entitlement, and, with intervention, her withdrawal could probably have been avoided.

6.2 Lifestyle expectations

The remaining students essentially experienced financial difficulty due to a mismatch between their expectations and the reality of student life, rather than hardship in any abstract sense. Some of the interviewees in this study had simply overspent in comparison to their income :

"The social life was a big factor for me… I'd never lived on my own and I went to university with a student loan and all my tuition fees paid for so I thought 'Wow, I've got all this money' and I didn't budget for anything." (Male, 19, February, Applied Science, returning to same institution on a similar subject).

Others compared their current financial resources unfavourably with their relative affluence prior to study or of their peers outside higher education (Thomas, 2002), keenly feeling the constraints which it placed them under. This feeling of not being to able to sustain the lifestyle which they wanted or which was perceived to

be 'normal' for students could influence other aspects of their university experience, including, for example, their ability to integrate into a social group :

"It didn't leave me with a lot to play with, which obviously meant that when the girls invited me out I couldn't go because I didn't have enough money." (Female, 21, October, Law, working and considering the Open University).

In conclusion, the student financial narratives either related to circumstances beyond their control which had prevented them from continuing or they related to a desire to enjoy a highly sociable lifestyle in a lively city for which they were not financed. The expression of hardship was therefore relative and this goes some way to explaining why it was mentioned by a quarter of students, but caused relatively few withdrawals; the experience of most students was that they resented having to be frugal, but that they could manage adequately if they budgeted carefully, took part-time work and amended their expectations.

7. Future plans and the 'carousel effect'

Of the students interviewed, 67% were intending to return to higher education in the following academic year or had already managed to arrange a transfer :

[Table 2 here]

Within the 33% of respondents not immediately intending to return to higher education, only 10% said that they would never return, with the remainder having unformed plans to study again at some point in the future. Most of these students had gone into full- or part-time work, but small numbers had gone into trade apprenticeships (3%) or had become self-employed (3%).

An overlapping group of male students ($p=0.007$) and those who had chosen their university on the basis of its location ($p=0.005$) were significantly less likely to be planning to return to higher education. Conversely, those students who left feeling that they had just chosen the wrong course were more likely to be planning a return to university ($p=0.021$). This matches well with the findings of Yorke et al (1997), where some

students withdraw to reconsider their options, whilst others have become permanently disenchanted with the higher education lifestyle.

Students who had chosen the university on the basis of its proximity to their home were more likely to want to return there on a different course (p=0.006) after withdrawing. This overlapped with the group of students from low income households (p=0.015), perhaps illustrating the more limited mobility of this group with respect to their parental or family home.

This study and others (e.g. Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997; Yorke et al, 1997; Davies & Elias, 2003) suggest that there is a 'carousel effect' operating within higher education, and particularly in the subgroup of institutions which have average or high first year withdrawal rates. Around two thirds of the students who leave will return to study in the following academic year, using their experience to support better preparation and decision making for a student's 'second-chance' course (Davies & Elias, 2003), where they are more likely to persist (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1997). Institutions need to be in a position to respond to this feature by smoothing students' exits (Quinn et al, 2005), ensuring that withdrawal is not stigmatised and providing easy re-entry points back into higher education (e.g. through credit transfer schemes or more flexible tuition fee systems).

8. Conclusions

8.1 Who withdrew in their first year?

Given the diversity of backgrounds, motivations, experiences and explanations, it is clearly impossible to pigeon-hole student withdrawals neatly into discrete categories. However, patterns of commonality did emerge which help to illuminate the phenomenon of first-year undergraduate withdrawal. The following groupings should be approached with caution and the percentages attached to them treated as indicative only; students could fall into more than one grouping or none at all :

- Academic strugglers and career path reviewers (20% of withdrawals). A group of motivated and well-qualified students accounted for the majority of those leaving due to 'wrong choice of course' or 'difficulties with course'. These students generally had specific subject interests or career paths in

mind when they entered higher education. However, their early experiences had caused them to review these. For some, they were struggling with independent learning, with the academic rigour in demanding subject areas or with practical placements (e.g. in healthcare and education). For others, they had simply come to a more gradual realisation that the course content was not as they imagined and that they wanted either a significant change or a similar course which was more or less vocational. These students were more likely to want to return to higher education and were very confident about their chance of success in the future.

- 'Unsettled' young students (20%). University was a daunting environment for some students, with the need to make friends quickly and settle into a new environment often many miles from home. For some this was insurmountable and they left university quickly; often within the first few weeks. These tended to be young female students, as well as a small number of students from rural communities. Some of these students were considering returning to higher education (generally at a more local institution or through the Open University), while others had abandoned their plans.

- Students with non-A Level qualifications (15%). The interviews revealed a strong difference between those students entering with A Levels and those entering with a range of other qualifications, including GNVQs/NVQs, access and foundation courses. These students tended to experience two reactions to pedagogy in higher education. Firstly, they were overwhelmed by the size of their cohort and the lack of personal attention offered by teaching staff. Secondly, they struggled with the concept of independent learning, finding it unstructured and dissonant with their previous educational experiences. Some left quickly while others survived some months through a process of gradual disengagement. These students were often considering "giving it another go" now that they knew what to expect.

- Middle class 'drifters' (15%). We have seen that within the group of students leaving feeling that they made a wrong choice of course, a significant subset had actually made little pro-active choice at all. They students tended to be from more affluent family backgrounds and to have not undertaken significant research into course or university options. Rather than having a specific subject or career interest, they had drifted into university on the basis of expectation amongst their family and peers. After an initial inappropriate engagement with higher education, they were almost all planning to return with the intention of making a more pro-active choice.

- <u>Involuntary withdrawal (10%).</u> A significant group of withdrawals were accounted for by students getting ill, having relationship breakdowns or having external family difficulties which caused them to leave (e.g. bereavement). Such 'involuntary withdrawals' (Brunsden et al, 2000) are naturally most likely to be found in older students, whose lives are naturally more complex and demanding, but younger students were also affected.

- <u>Young men with unrealistic lifestyle expectations (7%).</u> Over the last twenty years, the media has increasingly portrayed the student experience as socially exciting. It was clear from the interviews that this was a significant factor for a subgroup of almost exclusively male students who had chosen the university on the basis of its location in a lively city. These students became disillusioned when they realised that university did not afford the lifestyle to which they aspired and which their peers outside education enjoyed. Typically, they struggled to maintain an active social life and keep up with their studies. Once they had taken the decision to leave, generally later in the academic year after a period of disengagement, they tended not to be considering a return to higher education.

- <u>Low income students with financial problems (5%).</u> This small and heterogeneous grouping comprises students bound together by a common background and reason for leaving. It includes those whose funding was interrupted by family difficulties or crime, those who did not have a strong understanding of personal finances and those mature students who were not receiving the support to which they were entitled. There was a tendency for these students to want to return to the same university after sorting out their difficulties, perhaps signalling the limited geographical mobility of this group.

These categories thus account for over 90% of the withdrawals in this study, with the remainder having highly individual reasons for leaving.

8.2 Non-traditional students

This paper does not address the issue of whether non-traditional student were less likely to be retained, but they certainly did have distinct patterns of withdrawal. Students entering without A Levels struggled

academically with unfamiliar styles of teaching and learning in a situation where classes were larger and support less forthcoming. Students from low income backgrounds suffered financial difficulties which caused them to leave, although as we have seen these often related to external circumstances beyond their control.

However, non-traditional students were no more likely to be dissuaded from returning to higher education than students from more traditional backgrounds. They were more likely to seek to return to the same institution, suggesting that they had neither been adversely affected by feelings of failure nor irreparably alienated by the 'institutional habitus' as described by Thomas (2002).

8.3 Experience, dissatisfaction and attachment

Students in this study reported a range of negative experiences during their time at university, which ranged from one week to six months. In relatively few cases did students describe negative experiences which lay within the direct control of their institution. These were mainly around academic induction and support in the early stages of the course, where the student was struggling with the content or delivery. In some cases, even these could not be objectively described as 'negative', reflecting appropriately the demands of the course.

More commonly, the negative experiences reported by the interviewees related to their own interaction with their choice of institution or course, the university community or the prevailing student lifestyle. Their narrative was more often around the results of poor preparation, poor or passive decision-making and difficulties with socialisation or adapting to the student lifestyle. Some students were at pains to stress that they were generally satisfied with their institution and that they were pleased to have had the chance to re-evaluate their career plans.

It was also found that there was not always a strong correlation between negative experiences and active prompts to leave. For example, while 23% of interviewees in this study reported experiencing financial difficulty, this was only the main reason for withdrawal in less than one in ten cases.

Dissatisfaction, such as was explored in this study, was thus generally with the particular manifestation of a university experience, rather than with the specific course or institution, or with the general concept of higher

education. Interestingly, other studies have found that students who remain in higher education report similar negative experiences and dissatisfaction. For example, Johnston (2001) suggests that many students who persist and achieve highly also consider that they have chosen poorly or suffer negative experiences whilst at university, with little discernable difference between leavers and stayers. Similarly, Blythman & Orr (2002) found that the financial circumstances of those in difficulty and those surviving were generally very similar.

This paradox would suggest that negative experience or dissatisfaction are not necessarily the only dimension to student withdrawal. Whilst understanding which groups of students withdraw (and when) may illuminate the mechanics of the process to some extent, it does not answer the question about why outwardly similar students make different decisions. Rhodes & Nevill (2004) similarly identify satisfiers and dissatisfiers in the individual's transactions with the institution, which appear largely independent of their background.

One hypothesis which is worthy of further investigation is that there are strong factors which bind students into the institution, forming an 'attachment' which is strong enough to withstand negative stimuli in other areas of their university experience. For example, Yorke & Thomas (2003) and Forbes & Wickens (2005) have identified that a strong social network aids student retention, while Harrison & Baxter (2005) find students who are offered a financial bursary by an institution gain an early sense of commitment and raised motivation. Bennett's (2003) multivariate model of student retention draws strongly on relationship management theory, concluding that students experience a complex feedback web between satisfaction, motivation and academic performance, such that positive academic experiences could build an attachment which compensates for dissatisfaction elsewhere.

With this in mind, we might usefully consider an alternative retention model which is based more on persistence than withdrawal. Such a model would find its legitimacy in understanding that students are attached to an institution by a network of connections of varying strength; some academic, some social and some personal. Students persist at university where they have a sufficient breadth and strength of links, but withdraw where they have insufficient and where they are dissatisfied by one of more aspects of their experience. For example, a student in financial difficulty may persist if their academic experience is good, a student on the 'wrong course' will stay if they have a strong social network at the university, and so forth. It was notable that few of the students in this study had built any such links, with withdrawal seeming to them to be a relatively painless process.

This rejection of a deficit model shifts the emphasis of institutional efforts away from fire-fighting areas of perceived weakness, focusing rather on improving all aspects of the student experience. Approaches which focus solely on addressing dissatisfaction or identifying perceived 'at-risk' individuals are likely to meet with limited success. The aim thus becomes to provide wider and stronger ties to 'attach' students into the university community, especially in the early stage of their studies or even by extending induction into the pre-arrival period (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). To develop this model further, more research focusing on dissatisfaction and attachment amongst retained students is needed.

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%reporting negative experience	%leaving primarily for this reason
Course not as expected (42%)	Wrong choice of course (34%)
Difficulty settling in (25%)	Personal/social reasons (27%)
Accommodation wasn't suitable (23%)	Difficulties with course (14%)
Financial difficulty (23%)	Financial problems (9%)
Teaching style, content or quality (19%)	Multiple or complex (7%)
Use of independent learning (15%)	Travel, accommodation & lifestyle (5%)
Travel and transport problems (13%)	Academic failure (1%)
Homesickness (11%)	Offered employment (1%)

Table 1 : Negative experiences and primary reasons for withdrawal

Plans after withdrawing	%
Changing university and subject	21%
Returning to higher education - plans not yet finalised	18%
Returning to same university	15%
Changing university, pursuing same subject	7%
Changing to part-time study	6%

Table 2 : Educational plans for coming academic year