Research exploring the factors that impact student retention rates
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3 April 2019

Introduction

We are a group of students at Queen Mary University of London, and we were recruited for the purposes of conducting research into student retention, focusing primarily on the student perspective. Candace Skelton also participated the planning the direction of this project, dissemination of surveys and advertising of focus groups. Over the last 4 months, we have worked to shed light on the causes of differential dropout rates at the university, and started by conducting initial background research through a variety of sources.

We then sent surveys to students at the university, and we had 208 responses. The questions were related to student retention and the factors that influenced students, as well as information on demographics. The survey also gave an opportunity to give more detailed information in a free text box.
Additionally, we conducted 3 focus groups with students at the university in order to get detailed insight into the thoughts of students on the factors that have led to them considering leaving their university course early, as well as what factors encouraged them to remain on the course.

Based on the nature of this research, it was difficult for us to have access to students who had discontinued their studies at Queen Mary, University of London, but this is an area which could be explored in the future, to provide more information.

We conclude with recommendations based on the research we have conducted, taking into account the views of students at the university. We hope that our research will give a meaningful insight into the kind of support structures that Queen Mary can put into place, in order to improve student retention rates, and overall to improve the student experience.

Finally, we would like to thank our supervisor, Christina Perry for providing guidance and support. We would also like to thank all the students who took part in this research, in the focus groups and the surveys. We hope the findings of this research can benefit them and future cohorts to come.

Existing Data:

There is little public data on non-continuation rates between specific social groups, namely those with protected characteristics. The HESA non-continuation study distinguishes between students by age, year of study and highest qualifications obtained. 6.4% of students in England did not continue after first year between 2016 – 2017 (HESA, 2018). This number stood at 5.1% for QMUL students in the same year (HESA, 2018).
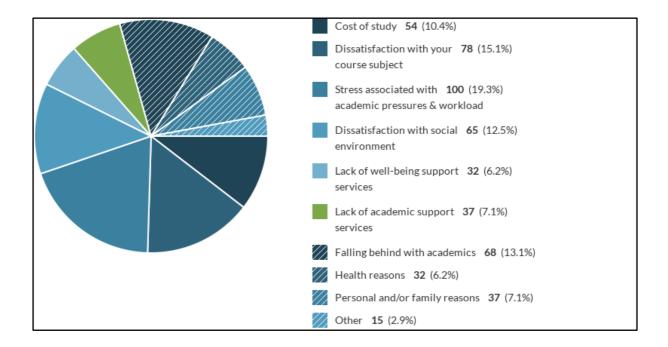
Nationally, the students that most likely to drop out are those with fewest or no prior qualifications (21.6%: HESA, 2018). Students least likely to drop out are those with highest prior qualifications (1.7%: HESA, 2018).

Within the group of higher-qualified students, those studying Business and Administrative, and Education studies are most likely to drop out, while those studying combined subjects, law, and medicine and dentistry are least likely to drop out. Medicine and dentistry have the lowest dropout rates across all levels of prior qualifications (1.4%: HESA, 2018). Computer Sciences have the highest (10.5%: HESA, 2018).

There has been little attempt to further stratify students and compare non-continuation in an intersectional manner at the national level, for example by breaking down prior qualifications by class, gender or ethnicity to look for further trends. Alternatively, national statistics on student retention could benefit from breaking down non-continuation rates within subjects by gender, ethnicity and disability.

At Queen Mary, there has been some attempt at such an intersectional approach to examining non-continuation; the QMUL Access and Participation Plan, 2019 – 2020 recognises that "there is an attainment gap between white and BME students in the humanities but either a significantly reduced or no gap in the sciences". It also recognises that "disabled students have a higher non-continuation rate than non-disabled students". A report done by Queen Mary's Engagement, Retention and Success team found little variation in withdrawal rates of BME students when compared with white students (Hartley, 2019). Participants in this study suggested that they felt a low degree of belonging in the Queen Mary community; this feeling was greater with students at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science than with those studying at the Faculty of Science and Engineering (Hartley, 2019). In this report, Hartley states that participants 'highlighted the tension between the wider institution of Queen Mary and participant's backgrounds and interests in relation to key moments of student learning experience" (Hartley 2019, p. 7). Additionally, we know that student outcomes are shaped by their experience in seeking formal support; the bonds that students create are shaped by the degree to which they feel acknowledged by the actors providing support and the institution as a whole (Hartley 2019, p. 12). In conjunction with this, NSS data shows that a large majority of students across all three faculties agreed with the statement that they had to opportunity to give feedback on their course; however, of the 82% of students that agreed with the statements, only 48% agreed that it was clear to them how their feedback had been acted on (NSS 2018).

Factors Influencing Students' Decision to Leave University Early:

Cost of study 54 (10.4%)

Dissatisfaction with your 78 (15.1%) course subject

Stress associated with 100 (19.3%) academic pressures & workload

Dissatisfaction with social 65 (12.5%) environment

Lack of well-being support 32 (6.2%) services

Lack of academic support 37 (7.1%) services

Falling behind with academics 68 (13.1%)

Health reasons 32 (6.2%)

Personal and/or family reasons 37 (7.1%)

Other 15 (2.9%)

I.   Stress associated with academic pressure & workload

University is well known to be academically demanding, with increased pressure and workload on students, compared to school studies. There are regular examinations and assignments, some of which have a minimum pass mark in order for the students to successfully progress. Employers and higher degree providers, consider the classification of a degree, increasing the pressure on students to achieve high grades.

We discussed this issue within our focus groups, as well as in the survey that we conducted.

Students explained that they were more stressed during exam time, and more likely to consider leaving the course early at this time of the academic year. One fourth year student from the School of Medicine and Dentistry reported, "I considered dropping out every time we had exams". On some courses this can be as high as 4 exam periods during the year, which could mean the stress is chronic and present throughout much of the academic year.

A first year Law Senior status student agreed with the sentiment, and said, "In terms of academic stress, that got a bit overwhelming at times; I had that a couple of times last semester."

Students particularly in their first year of study, are keen on immersing themselves in the student experience. This includes joining student societies and networking, which is increasingly valued in the workforce, as creating rounded students who are more employable. However, students complained that they "can't do it all", with limited free time and the high workload.

A first year student studying law in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences also described the phenomenon of "imposter syndrome." She explained the feeling of "just not knowing if I am good

enough for what I'm doing. Either in academia or in the professional world because there is so much pressure to get a job and do stuff. So just not knowing if I'm good enough for that and if my grades coming into this university will be reflective of my actual ability."

Other students explained how they had struggled to balance the academic demands of their course, with other aspects of their lives, such as responsibilities related to family or working. These can be time-consuming demands, which have an impact both on academic performance but also on stress levels. A student from the School of Medicine and Dentistry explained, "I still have responsibilities and a life to lead".

In the survey, 59.2% cited stress associated with the academic pressures and workload, as a reason for why they considered dropping out of the course.

II. Dissatisfaction with course

Students have expectations of the university course. This can be formed from a variety of sources including hearing from students on the course or alumni, reading the prospectus, attending open days, or researching on the internet, etc. Some students found that when they started the course, it did not meet their expectations, and this led to them reconsidering their choice of course and/or university.

There is an emphasis on independent learning at university, with students expected to take responsibility for their own learning, including preparatory reading and attendance at lectures/seminars. However, one student from the School of Medicine and Dentistry, currently studying an intercalated masters degree said, "independent learning is taken far too seriously". Additionally, one student at the Faculty of Science and Engineering said the teaching style was not catered to students' individual needs. He said he felt as though he had to learn all the material on his own, and argued that the 'one size fits all' way of teaching made him feel he easily fell behind. He felt that teaching staff did not take into account different learning styles and the fact that students would learn at different rates.

On a similar note, a student who responded to the survey said, "I feel that I'm learning everything by myself". Another student said, "I could turn up to every seminar without doing any work and there'll be no issue at all". This suggests a disparity between what students expected of their course and what they found on starting.

Both medical and dental students in the focus groups we conducted, reached a general consensus that the preclinical years were "less enjoyable" compared to clinical years, where they had greater contact with patients.

Another issue which arose in our focus groups was related to module choice, with students feeling like this was limited. Some compulsory modules were not enjoyed by students, but a requirement in order for progression. Two students at the Faculty of Science and Engineering told us that they found themselves picking optional modules based on whether they would be able to pass them,

rather than based on their interests. They agreed with each other that when they first started university they had planned to take certain modules but after realising they would struggle to fully grasp the content and succeed, chose to do a different or 'easier' module.

In the survey, 46.2% cited dissatisfaction with the course, as a reason for why they considered dropping out of the course.

III. Dissatisfaction with social environment

Some students cited the social environment at the university as feeling "segregated".
One first year computer science student said, "one of the problems I can say is that we actually feel like we don't have a friend". This lack of social support can feel isolating, especially at a university with a student body of more than 25,000.

A fourth year medical student described the feeling of community, "There is a great community amongst students, but not amongst tutors/lecturers/PBL tutors".

A student response in the surveys, also added, "Queen Mary doesn't give a 'university' vibe. Everyone here doesn't feel like they go to the same university."

Another first year medical student expressed that she thought "there are not enough social spaces on campus", as well as no outdoor space in the Whitechapel campus, or common spaces. There has been an expansion in student numbers and courses offered on the Whitechapel campus, but students in our focus groups said there had been no expansion of student spaces.

In the survey, 38.5% cited dissatisfaction with the social environment, as a reason for why they considered dropping out of the course.

IV. Financial cost

All students in our focus groups had been negatively impacted by the rise in tuition fees, but particular groups that struggled with this included international students and graduate students studying medicine/dentistry as a second subject. These students often were not eligible for the same level of financial support through bursaries and loans as their home/EU student undergraduate counterparts.

Some students also explained how they had to take on jobs to support themselves financially, but this created an extra burden with both increased levels of stress and an impact on studying.

One international student commented, "moving to London, the cost of living is ridiculous". Even students supported by family members, expressed feelings of "feeling like a burden". A graduate student in their final year of studying undergraduate medicine said, "peers from my old course are working and earning money".

One student told us that he was having to pay for a tutor on top of the cost of university in order to pass some of his modules, which had increased the financial burden.

In the survey, 32% cited dissatisfaction with the cost of studying, as reason for why they considered dropping out of the course.

V. Academic student support services and wellbeing student support services
At the university, there are student support services, as well as QMUL advice and counselling services. The purpose is to provide support to those students who are struggling academically, or experiencing mental health problems, or other problems that they require help with. These students are often those who are more likely to leave the course early, therefore we wanted to find out more about the experiences that students had with these services.

A first year law senior status student said, "they tell you that there is advice and counselling and stuff but from what I've heard from people, access to it is really limited, you have to be like at the moment of crisis to actually get any support and clearly lots of people aren't there, they are just bubbling at the over stressed levels."
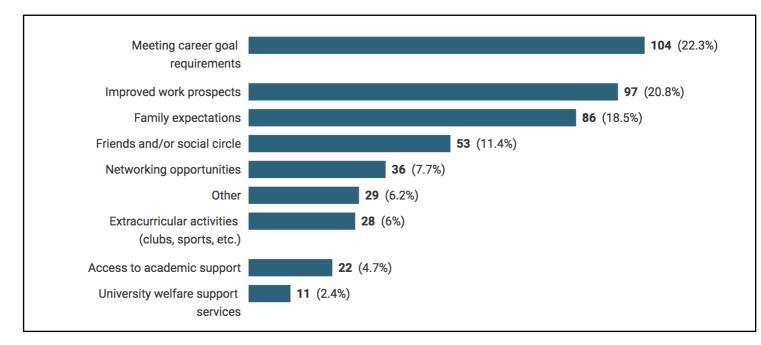
Students who have accessed the services also expressed feelings of "feeling like another student number". A Masters student from the school of medicine and dentistry said, "Student support have the same answer for everyone, like an FAQ on a website, which deters you from going back".

In the survey, 21.9% cited lack of academic support services, and 18.9% cited lack of wellbeing support services, as reason for why they considered dropping out of the course.

Factors Influencing Students' Decision to Continue Studies:
In surveying and speaking to students, part of the goal of this research was to determine whether there was anything in particular that Queen Mary provided students with that encouraged them to continue their course despite considering dropping out of university. The survey asked students to

select reasons that influence their decision to stay from a list, and to select all the options that applied to them. The data below is the result:

Reason	Count	Percentage
Meeting career goal requirements	104	(22.3%)
Improved work prospects	97	(20.8%)
Family expectations	86	(18.5%)
Friends and/or social circle	53	(11.4%)
Networking opportunities	36	(7.7%)
Other	29	(6.2%)
Extracurricular activities (clubs, sports, etc.)	28	(6%)
Access to academic support	22	(4.7%)
University welfare support services	11	(2.4%)

The research shows that a big influencing factor in students' decision to remain at university is knowing that their career outcomes will be improved by having completed a degree. Some students, in responding to our survey added that an aversion to loss contributed to their decision not to drop out. As they had already invested in tuition fees and committed time to their course they said that dropping out would be too great a loss of time and money. A student at HSS told us that the career services she had access to through the university affected her decision to continue her studies. She thought that some of the careers events and opportunities offered through the university had served as a reminder of why she chose to study her subject and made her feel more confident about finding work after university. Another student noted that the eventual prospect of getting a good degree from a good university kept him going.

Another important factor in their decision to remain at university discussed by students in focus groups was family and personal expectations. In the survey, when answering what influenced their decision to stay, students added answers like, 'shame of dropping out', 'wanting to work hard and complete the course - probably out of stubbornness' and 'refusal to fail'. One student who had considered dropping out due to the pressure associated with her course said that she had stayed due to her personal expectations and her family. She said she could not go back to her family and admit she was struggling with her degree as it would be looked upon poorly. She also said that she chose to do her degree to have better prospects so not being able to complete it would be a major downfall. An international student cited the shame associated with going home without a degree pushed him continue his studies.

In discussing students' social circles as an influence on retention we received mixed opinions. In one focus group students highlighted the divided nature of friendship groups and 'cliques' at Queen Mary and discussed their difficulty with fitting into societies. On the other hand, in another focus group students cited societies as one of the important factors that was keeping them at university. One student said, "if you remove the society aspect and a few other social factors I probably wouldn't have stayed'. Another added that societies were very inclusive and appreciated the chance to meet like-minded people and have the opportunity to discuss their university struggles with people going through similar experiences. Students at the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry told us that there was a great community among students; one student stated that their decision to remain was because of peer support.

University support services also received mixed reviews from students in our focus groups. While some students told us about their difficulty accessing support services, one student discussed the important way that the Dyslexia and Disability Service supported them in their degree. He stated that he felt like he had found an advocate in the DDS. He said that DDS provided him with the opportunity to go and talk to someone about their problems at university, but also just chat to an understanding person about their day. He was also able to access help with handling stress and disordered eating as a result of stress by speaking to individuals at the DDS. However, the student, who has autism and dyslexia, did say that the role of the DDS as an advocate is limited. While the DDS had reached out individual lecturers to provide the student with feedback after he had failed his exams, he found they could do little to ensure that feedback was constructive. In discussing the feedback he said, "it was belittling, it felt like a copy paste thing, a throw away response. It kind of put me down and made me feel like 'you weren't up to the task, maybe you shouldn't be here'…it was a little bit alienating". For this individual the DDS was an important support system, but its effectiveness is limited to advocating for the student and it cannot control the outcomes in terms of other actors, such as lecturers.

Conclusion & Suggestions:

While there are services that students have taken advantage of to support their studies and influence their decision to stay, there are a number of improvements that we believe would be crucial to improving student satisfaction and subsequently, student retention. A number of these suggestions were provided by students in focus groups.

In terms of improving student satisfaction with their course a big concern for students was inability to access and efficiently communicate with their seminar leaders and lecturers. Students at the School of Science and Engineering particularly wanted improved relationships with their seminar leaders. Students said in focus group that in seminars, they struggled to get individual help because of class sizes. Some students felt they were falling behind because they could not access help in seminars. One student suggested that it would be helpful to have an improved monitoring system to determine which students were falling behind on course materials so they could be identified before major exam periods. Students wanted more opportunities to be given feedback. In order to improve students' satisfaction with course materials it may be beneficial to provide taster days or more detailed information for students when choosing modules.

Many students struggled with the financial cost of living and studying in London. It was clear from focus groups that students did not have full awareness of the help that is available to them from the university in the form of grants and bursaries, so improved advertising of these option would be beneficial. One student suggested that a more flexible approach to time-tabling would help students who work alongside their studies; it was suggested that greater flexibility on the part of school administrators for students to change seminar groups would allow students who need to work to support their studies to do so. Students at the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry also suggested that having one mentor throughout their studies would improve students' support systems on their course.

The social environment of the university is key to creating a sense of belonging for students, however, it seems to be an aspect of university life that many students struggle with. An increased feeling of belonging would surely improve student retention. International students especially told us that it was difficult to integrate into a new university while also trying to integrate into a new culture; more support from the university or Students' Union may be needed to help international students. As a campus university, Queen Mary has huge potential to improve its social environment and increase student satisfaction. University accommodation continues to be an untapped resource that the university could be using to increase socialisation on campus. Students living on campus have said that there was a lack of accommodation-based socials and that most people tend to keep to themselves. The university should work with residential services to put on social events beyond just Fresher's Week to ensure students have continuing opportunity to meet new people. In addition, increased investment in social spaces would be beneficial.

Academic and other support services can be improved. It would be beneficial to have greater collaboration between the services, to ensure student support is well rounded. Student support for dentistry students was hailed as being very supportive as staff knew the students from their first year throughout their studies, which created an environment where students felt comfortable in accessing services. Ensuring that students know about the services open to them, as well as the staff they can speak to in crucial to improving retention. In addition, ensuring that student treatment feels personalised is key to successful outcomes. As students reported difficulty accessing mental health services, greater investment is needed. Students only have access to timely appointment in cases of suicidal ideations, but in focus groups, students told us that there are many feelings that require mental health services before an individual feels suicidal and these should be addressed more efficiently. As mental health resources are overstretched, the university could also be doing more to advertise alternative services outside of those provided by the university.