



Access & Participation Plan: Student Retention Literature Review

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Key Words: student retention, belonging, academic skills, induction, transition

DOI: [10.17870/bathspa.00017847](https://doi.org/10.17870/bathspa.00017847)

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Abstract

Student retention is a critical metric utilised by universities, colleges, and governments. As a concept, retention – student reenrolment per academic year – relates closely to England's Office for Students' B3 metrics of continuation and completion. Research shows that social and cultural capital affect student outcomes in higher education. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have lower social and cultural capital than their counterparts, which can create barriers in higher education. Not to say underrepresented student success is not probable, but it is linked to socioeconomic position, capital and a subjective belief in oneself. This review examines how retention interacts with capital, sense of belonging, support mechanisms, and academic success. We explore how a sense of belonging, through interpersonal relationships, social interaction, and feeling valued, impacts a student's desire to persist and overall continuation rates. Studies show that underrepresented students' retention rates increase when they feel a sense of belonging. Alarming, these students are more likely to report lower levels of belonging than their peers. Positive induction, transition, and on-course support for social belonging must be implemented to support those most at risk of non-continuation. We then explore how the social and academic variables of student life interconnect in complex ways. Structural barriers create uneven access to academic skills support, with those most in need least likely to engage. We recognise, in turn, that intersectional identities and holistic support must be linked to provide meaningful, personalised

support attuned to cultural and social needs, social justice issues, and the inherent prejudices operating within university systems.

Summary of key findings

- Multiple definitions of retention: A diversifying student body requires institutional change that considers alternative approaches to facilitate success and retention from a broad realm of understanding;
- Completion and continuation are the closest official B3 metrics measured by the Office for Students (OfS);
- Many related terms (success, attrition) in the sector have similar reasons behind student motivations and/or barriers to continuing education (wider than student characteristics);
- The sector and Bath Spa University (BSU) trends for continuation and completion are generally lower for underrepresented groups, with BSU averages lower than the sector;
- To support underrepresented students, universities need to implement mechanisms that provide underrepresented students with the same opportunities as those who carry high capital and social networks;
- Student sense of belonging is influenced by their interpersonal relationships within their institutions;
- Successful transitions to, and retention in, higher education is impacted by sense of belonging, with a statistically significant relationship found between sense of belonging and continuation;
- Universities should consider which activities and processes may impact students' social networks, which in turn may bolster the connection they have with their institution;
- Social interaction may be beneficial to student retention;
- Positive induction and transition support is needed to support student retention – clear communication at key transition points can lessen feelings of overwhelm;
- Need to foster values between students and staff to validate students and foster more meaningful relationships;
- Sense of belonging has more impact on the retention of underrepresented groups, but they are not always



replicated within all demographic groups. Declines in sense of belonging have been seen in students from minority groups, needing more socialisation activities for these students;

- The social and academic variables of student life are interconnected in complex ways and universities need to address both to support retention – academic engagement contributes to sense of belonging and social engagement;
- Positive results have been found in relation to academic skills support and retention or success, but limited causal exploration exists;
- Often, the students who access academic skills support are not the students most in need of support. Structural barriers exist, which limit underrepresented students from accessing needed support;
- Academic support must meet the needs of diverse students with different learning styles and development paths;
- There is a missing link with support systems between intersectional identities and holistic support – multiple challenges for students with intersectional identities (multiple responsibilities, lower academic preparation) can be a source of resilience or a barrier;
- Different students require personalised and individual support with recognition for their unique needs based on cultural, and social justice issues and prejudice inherent within university systems;
- Mature student support needs to be facilitated through student-centred services, again, requiring personalised and accessible support to empower students to succeed based on their own agency.

Retention and wider context

Improving the success and retention of students is a global social and economic imperative for universities, governments, and colleges (Shah et al., 2021). Student retention responsibility falls to HE institutions themselves, a shift from a prior blame model of student responsibility (Hoyt, 2023; Tight, 2020). Spady's (1970) theoretical model of retention pivotally opened this blame discourse to interdisciplinary explanations, away from focusing on student characteristics (Burke, 2019). Tinto (1997, 1993), building on Spady's model, further argued that the "social transition of incoming, first-year students is essential to their success" (p.15), including the development of new relationships and a new community (Burke, 2019). With a shift in outlook of supporting retention comes a shift in understanding of success for a diverse student body (Shah et al., 2021). Definitions of success, formalised by key players in the higher education sector, i.e., completion, continuation, graduation (on time), can obscure personal measures of success based on gaining new skills, lifelong friendships, self-worth, alternative worldviews, and academic validation (Shah et al., 2021). A diversifying student body requires institutional change that considers alternative approaches to facilitate success and retention from a broad realm of understanding (Shah et al., 2021).

Meanings of retention and related concepts

Within the literature, there are similar definitions of retention (see Burke, 2019; Shafiq et al., 2022; Tight, 2020). Shafiq et al. (2020) perceive retention as the number of students re-enrolling in university per academic year. Tight (2020) understands retention (linked to engagement) as ensuring enrolled students remain in, and complete, their degrees. Burke (2019) highlights a typical definition of student retention: "continued [enrolment] of a student from the first year to the second year (p. 13). In England, continuation, completion, and progression are the key B3 metrics measured by the Office for Students (OfS) (OfS, 2022). Continuation matches most closely to Burke's definition of retention. Continuation outcomes follow a cohort of students within a provider, tracked through the early stages of their degrees, determining who continues or qualifies to continue in active study in subsequent years (OfS, 2022). Full-time continuation rates are measured from the date a student enters higher education to a census date one year and 15 days after they began their course (OfS, 2022). Part-time rates are measured two years and 15 days after a course start date (OfS, 2022). Completion rates follow the same definition, but at a date of four years and 15 days after commencement (six years and 15 days for part-time students) (OfS, 2022). Completion rates alongside continuation reflect Shafiq et al.'s (2022) and Tight's (2020) definitions of retention.

Success and Attrition

There are many related terms to retention: experience, partnership, community, integration, attrition, dropout, withdrawal, satisfaction, success, and performance (Tight, 2020). Each term relates to similar multifaceted and complex





issues within higher education, linked to student transitions and adjustments (Tight, 2020). Some of these terms are negatively associated – dropout, attrition, and withdrawal, with other terms, success and performance, reframing the narrative (Tight, 2020). Understanding what leads to success is crucial in supporting students to achieve their goals. Some indicators of student learning success include student behaviours, orientation, motivation levels, and choices in an institution (Emekako & Westhuizen, 2021). Self-determination, self-motivation, student intentions, and the act of realistic goal setting also influence success and retention (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023), reflecting a need for metacognitive-based qualities. However, such an outlook could be seen to reflect a deficit model of student responsibility for their own success (following Hoyt, 2023). Instead, student characteristics are one factor of a multifaceted problem that cannot be solved with traditional methods of problem-solving (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023), with institutions needing to reflect on their roles in the process.

Attrition rates of students are highest between years one and two (Ashton-Hay & Doncaster, 2021; Burke, 2019). Ashton-Hay and Doncaster (2021) further reflect that first-year student dropouts are close to double that of second-year students, highlighting an important focus for institutions in bridging the student experience. There are several reasons a student may drop out of higher education, including financial difficulties, academic failure, or a lack of sense of belonging (Hoyt, 2023). Other reasons include programme quality, psychosocial, and practical factors associated with courses, with equity group departure centred around family and financial obligations (Ashton Hay & Doncaster, 2021). As such, relationships exist between a student's background, their social capital, and an institution's context, influencing who stays and who leaves education (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

Student Capitals

There is considerable evidence to suggest that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have less cultural and social capital, which can impact their ability to flourish in education (Kerrigan et al., 2018). Not to say that the success of underrepresented students is not probable, it is influenced by socioeconomic position linked to capital, alongside a subjective belief in oneself (Kerrigan et al., 2018). Capital, then, is considered one of the four dominant causes of differing student outcomes in Higher Education (Kerrigan et al., 2018). Social mobility and capital are more likely to be observed in students from parents with higher educational backgrounds and professional employment (Kerrigan et al., 2018). As such, utilising social and cultural capital to one's advantage can enhance sense of belonging and advance student trajectories in and out of university (Kerrigan et al., 2018).

The student experience of higher education reflects the broader processes and inequities in society, compounding the workload of university with other everyday struggles related to social, economic, and cultural capitals (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Instrumental factors of financial position

and work, alongside academic study, create an environment that increases the likelihood of dropping out (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Those with more social, economic, and cultural capital will be more likely to overcome instrumental challenges; however, more opaque factors linked to HE culture such as the hidden curriculum, the cultural dimension of HE (interactions with students based on background), student identity (significant for working class students), prior education, and poor teaching quality/feelings of isolation or academic hostility, tied to class and ethnicity, all influence student retention (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

Underrepresented and commuter student groups in the UK have been shown to have lower engagement levels in their student experience, academic learning, and within society, which in turn lowers their success rates (Shah et al., 2021). Engagement with studies factors into retention and success, with students needing high self-efficacy, a sense of wellbeing, and a sense of belonging (Ashton Hay & Doncaster, 2021). As students' capital influences these traits, there is a need to address retention from this root of inequity. Differential outcomes for different groups of students are recorded by HEIs in England, with the Office for Students documenting all provider statistics for target groups.

Differing Outcomes in Context

The Student Outcomes Data Dashboard, created by the OfS, shows the 2022-23 continuation and completion rates of underrepresented groups across all OfS-registered provider groups in Higher Education (OfS, 2025). These trends provide a baseline for student retention rates across different student groups.

Sector Trends

The continuation rates for students with a disability are higher than those with no reported disability, 89.1% compared to 88.7%. The completion rates show an opposite trend, with students with a disability completing at 86.3%, compared to those with no reported disability at 88.7% (2.4 pp difference). The highest continuation rates for ethnicity are as follows: White – 90.2%, Asian – 89.2%, Mixed – 87.9%, Other – 85.5%, and Black – 85.2%. For completion, the ethnicity trend remains the same: 89.3%, 87.9%, 85.9%, 84.6%, and 82%, respectively. For students from IMD Quintiles 3, 4, or 5, the continuation rates were 91.5%, whereas those from Quintiles 1 or 2 were





5.6 percentage points lower at 85.9%. The same IMD trend is observed for completion, with Quintiles 3, 4, and 5 at 90.7%, and Quintiles 1 and 2 at 83.9%. Mature student continuation rates were lower than those of under 21 students, with an 8.9 percentage point difference, 91% vs. 82.1% (OfS, 2025). Mature student completion rates were lower than those of younger students, with rates of 82.1% for students aged 21-30, 80.9% for those aged 31 years or older, and 90.3% for those under 21 years old (OfS, 2025).

Bath Spa University (BSU) Trends

When examining BSU's continuation and completion rates for underrepresented groups, outcomes tend to follow sector trends, albeit at lower percentages (BSU data refers to all registered undergraduate students, i.e. including direct delivery provision in London and all franchised partner delivery). The continuation rate for students with a disability was 88.2% compared to 81.3% for students with no reported disability. The completion trend follows the sector, albeit at a smaller percentage point difference, 86.4% for those with a reported disability compared to 87.4% (1 pp difference) for those with no reported disability. Ethnicity continuation trends were lower than sector averages, and followed a different pattern: White – 86.2%, Mixed – 75.9%, Black – 74.9%, Asian – 72.2%, Other – 68.2%. Ethnicity completion trends were also lower than sector averages, following a similar pattern to BSU's continuation trends: White – 87.9%, Mixed – 82.6%, Asian – 80.4%, Black – 75.5%, and Other – 66.7%. For students from IMD Quintiles 3, 4, or 5, the continuation rates were 88%, compared to Quintiles 1 or 2, with a 10.9 pp difference at 77.1%. IMD completion rates were 89% for Quintiles 3,4, or 5, and 80.6% for Quintiles 1 or 2. Mature student continuation and completion rates were significantly lower than under 21 students: students aged under 21 continued at 90.4% and completed at 89.2%, those aged 21-30 continued at 75.9% (14.5 pp difference) and completed at 80.4% (8.8 pp difference), and those aged 31+ continued at 77.2% (13.2 pp difference) and completed at 67.5% (21.7 pp difference) (OfS, 2022b).

To support underrepresented students, universities need to implement mechanisms that provide underrepresented students with the same opportunities as those who carry high capital and social networks. In-curriculum and co-curricular academic support alongside student identities, belonging and capital all affect student retention (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). This remainder of this review will cover the following topics related to retention: building a sense of belonging, transition support, and academic skills support.

Student Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging relates to a university student's relationship with their institution. It is often considered subjective and multi-dimensional, comprising their connection with both the university itself and with their peers (Gilani et al., 2024; Pedler et al., 2021). Due to its personal nature, it should be considered a psychological construct, which is distinct from students' academic and social integration (Carales & Nora, 2020). Burke (2019) found that two aspects of belonging emerged in the existing literature: co-curricular programming, related to housing communities and academic communities outside of the classroom; and service programming, such as campus recreation. This multi-faceted approach is shared by Carales and Nora (2020) who defined sense of belonging as the feeling of being valued and respected by the institution both within and outside of the classroom. Gilani and Thomas (2025) build on this further, naming the relationship that students have with their peers as the biggest factor influencing their feelings of belonging. They found that students' connections with other students on their course of study was most important, but those made through extra-curricular groups and in accommodation were also rated highly (Gilani & Thomas, 2025). Pedler et al. (2021) similarly found that sense of belonging was significantly influenced by a student's interpersonal relationships within their institution.

Sense of Belonging and Retention

In recent years there has been a large increase in the number of published articles and academic groups focusing on the connection between sense of belonging and retention, although it should be noted that the majority so far are within the US (Gilani et al., 2024). Several articles comprise a systematic literature review to identify and evaluate existing research on this topic. Burke (2019) found that an increase in sense of belonging indicated an increased likelihood of students continuing from their first to second year of study, and that development of both academic and social spheres was important for ensuring a student's retention. This view was shared by Carales and Nora (2020), who identified the importance of validation inside and outside of the classroom as a means of fostering a good sense of belonging, which itself was directly connected with student retention and degree completion. Gilani and Thomas (2025) also noted that student belonging was a significant factor impacting on both intentions to persist (a student's desire to continue studying at an institution), and directly on retention.

Psychological distress, exacerbated by a poor sense of belonging associates with poor academic outcomes, such as lower completion rates (van Kessel et al., 2025). These outcomes are potentially due to students disengaging with their learning as a result of feeling disconnected from, or a mismatch between, their background and the institution (Pedler et al., 2021). The literature also identified that the importance of sense of belonging for successful transition to – and retention in – higher education was significant (Pedler et al., 2021). Pitas et al. (2023) noted that traditionally,





student retention was viewed as a reflection of a student's ability to cope with higher education, with the impact of their environment and social networks mostly not questioned. More recently, it has been identified that in addition to this academic side, the relationships a student has with their fellow students, staff and environment may also be pivotal in shaping their feelings of attachment to their institution, and subsequent retention (Pitas et al., 2023). Rasco et al. (2020) also supported this view, remarking that when a student has positive and supportive interactions with other members of their university, this enables them to experience a sense of belonging, which improves the likelihood of their retention. However, there was conflicting evidence in the existing literature regarding the importance of institutional versus peer relationships (Rasco et al., 2020). Rasco et al. (2020) found the latter as more important, with students more likely to remark on the impact of bonding with their fellow peers, when considering factors that impacted their retention.

Desire to Persist Vs Actual Continuation Rates

Recent studies have focused on two distinct aspects of the connection between sense of belonging and retention. The first is the impact of sense of belonging on desire to persist, and the second is the impact on actual continuation rates.

Desire to persist (i.e., a student's inclination to continue their studies) links to Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), which explains that a statement of intention is the strongest predictor of actual behaviour – in this instance, how a student's choice to continue with their studies results directly from their intention to do so (Pitas et al., 2023). They found a significant positive relationship between students' attitudes, perceived social norms towards graduation, and perceived behavioural control and their intention to re-enrol. Attitude towards an institution was found to be the strongest single predictor of this desire to continue, suggesting that it is more important to ensure students have a positive relationship with the whole university holistically than with their specific course of study (Pitas et al., 2023). Their results also showed the importance of both the physical and social environment, with higher levels of place identity to the campus and institution (Pitas et al., 2023). Higher levels related to more positive attitudes and perceived norms towards a course, university, and graduation (Pitas et al., 2023). Pitas et al. (2023) note that this attachment to place was the result of a student's perception of the social network they had on campus, with their functional attachment to the campus itself (place dependence) appearing far less important – in accordance with previous research. Overall, this suggests that universities should consider which activities and processes may impact students' social networks, which in turn may bolster the connection they have with their institution.

Using a mixed-methods questionnaire, Pedler et al. (2021) sought to establish whether students had considered not continuing their course and any reasons why they subsequently chose to stay. They found no significant difference in the sense of belonging of students who stated that they had never considered dropping out or had done

so only once. However, amongst those who stated that they had sometimes or often considered dropping out, there was a significantly lower sense of belonging, suggesting that low sense of belonging may be linked to students considering leaving their course of study more often (Pedler et al., 2021). Gilani et al. (2024) noted a lack of consistent approaches to measuring sense of belonging and retention in the existing research and, as a result, created a bespoke 'intention to persist scale'. They found that students' sense of belonging correlated with their intention to persist. As such, changes in sense of belonging were indicative of changes in intention to persist, suggesting that supporting students to develop and maintain a strong sense of belonging in a university is likely to increase their intention to continue with their studies. However, they did note that further research was needed to consider the potential overlap between the scales for sense of belonging and intention to persist; and noted that changes in sense of belonging were not a significant predictor of students' eventual continuation status (Gilani et al., 2024).

Zawada (2024) carried out a cross-sectional, quantitative survey on Allied Health students at a large UK university to establish their feelings of belonging and mattering in both the university and clinical environment. She found that those who had seriously considered not continuing with their course had lower median scores across all four scales (belonging at university and on clinical placement; mattering at university and on clinical placement) than those who had not, with the largest difference in the belonging at university scale. The findings demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between students' feelings of belonging and consideration of not continuing their course (Zawada, 2024).

Van Kessel et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to identify the relationship between university sense of belonging and eventual academic outcomes. They found a significant small-to-medium positive correlation between sense of belonging and grades, suggesting that those who felt more connected to their institution were more likely to achieve a good outcome. They also found links between sense of belonging in the classroom and with the faculty, and retention. Similarly, there was a strong positive relationship between students feeling connected and their wellbeing. Overall, it was noted that the results indicated that small improvements could support increased sense of belonging, which in turn could have a meaningful impact on student success (van Kessel et al., 2015).

Gilani et al. (2024) used longitudinal design to investigate the relationship between sense of belonging, desire to continue studying, and actual continuation of undergraduate students. They found that sense of belonging was a strong predictor of eventual continuation status at all points in time except at the start of the first academic year (Gilani et al., 2024). Using a randomised experimental design, Rasco et al. (2020) compared the impact of a closeness-induction task with that of a small-talk task on student retention. Students were paired with a peer and given a series of questions to ask them. Those assigned the closeness-induction task were given three lists



of questions becoming increasingly personal; those assigned the small-talk task were given three lists of questions which did not elicit deep disclosure. The results showed that the students who had participated in the closeness-induction task had better impressions of their partners and higher retention rates than those who had participated in the small-talk task. This suggests that social interaction may be beneficial to retention (Rasco et al., 2020).

Importance of Positive Induction and Transition Support

Carales and Nora (2020) identified that students' lives change considerably when they start university, and they are likely to have increased anxiety from feelings of overwhelm. This is concerning for retention because as anxiety increases, sense of belonging decreases, which may in turn impact on retention. Gilani and Thomas (2025) built on this, noting that transition periods – both when starting university and when there are changes in academic workload – are challenging for a student's sense of belonging, again due to them feeling overwhelmed. They believed that clear communication about expectations is important for students, particularly at these key transition points (Gilani & Thomas, 2025).

To improve student retention, Zawada (2024) stated that a university should adapt their provision to allow its students to retain their identity. This was supported in Tang et al. (2023), who noted that fostering shared values between students and staff was important for making sure students felt validated and had a strong sense of belonging. This is particularly important at key transition points where shared experiences can support the development of healthy peer relationships and social networks that can motivate students if they later face challenges. They identified that a “whole-of-institution and whole-of-student” approach was most valuable for ensuring successful transition, with particular emphasis placed on students in underrepresented groups, as these were more prone to consider leaving their course. The connections made need to be genuine, with students preferring to be known as an individual even if this was on a smaller scale (Zawada, 2020). Rasco et al. (2020) found similar results in their study, with the students who participated in the closeness-induction task (designed to foster more personal relationships), having better impressions of their partners and higher retention rates. Burke (2019) also identified that many universities are starting to develop cohort models, where students move through their course and may share accommodation within pre-defined focus areas (e.g. STEM). This has been particularly beneficial amongst female and minority students (Burke, 2019).

It should be noted that Gilani et al (2024) found that sense of belonging was a strong predictor of eventual continuation status at all points in time except at the start of the first academic year. This may be problematic from a transition perspective as it may suggest that students are less able to fully understand and declare their sense of belonging at this early point in time, making it difficult to evaluate how successful transition support interventions are in harbouring a good sense of belonging. However, the researchers do also note that it may simply be that it is too early in the academic

year for sense of belonging to be a reliable predictor of eventual continuation – in other words, students do correctly assess their sense of belonging, but it is too soon to see if and how it may ultimately impact on their retention (Gilani et al., 2024).

Underrepresented Groups

Burke (2019) identified that some studies showed that sense of belonging had more impact on retention amongst students in underrepresented groups. Gilani and Thomas (2025) noted that students from those backgrounds are likely to face discrimination which may lead to self-editing behaviours – both of which are barriers to a strong sense of belonging and may, in turn, have an impact on retention. This built on their earlier research (Gilani et al, 2024), which found that the relationships between sense of belonging and retention were not always replicated within all demographic groups. In particular, those from minority backgrounds were more likely to report significantly lower levels of belonging than their peers. Those from contextual admissions routes and in minority ethnic groups also saw declines in sense of belonging when compared to cohort averages. One positive the researchers noted was that universities which seek to improve belonging for all students may find it has a disproportionately positive effect on those in underrepresented groups.

Carales and Nora (2020) conducted a study of student survey items and institutional data to collect data on background, financial, and psychosocial characteristics of students attending a university in the South-West USA. They found that receiving financial support had a negative impact on sense of belonging. They posited that this was likely due to these students experiencing more financial stress and worry resulting in a decrease in belonging, possibly due to not having the resource to buy necessary course materials, fully participate in social events, or simply just feeling that they were different from their peers with greater financial means (Carales & Nora, 2020). Carales and Nora (2020) also found that the more opportunities a student had to learn from and socialise with their peers, the more likely they were to develop a good sense of belonging. This was particularly evident in relation to race and ethnicity. They found that the more that students engaged in abstract discussions about racial issues, the lower their sense of belonging. Conversely,





if they were given the opportunity to learn more about a fellow student of a different race or ethnicity, the higher their sense of belonging. The findings suggest that to support all students to develop a good sense of belonging – regardless of background – it is important to allow them opportunities to get to know their peers. This development could be through collaborative learning opportunities, extra-curricular activities, and the provision of physical spaces for students to socialise outside of class (Carales & Nora, 2020).

Similar findings were identified by Rasco et al. (2020), who noted that students of Colour were more likely to struggle to integrate in higher education due to lack of role models, social support and financial aid, as well as being subjected to discrimination. They found that, despite this, the benefit of participating in positive social interactions (in the form of their closeness-induction task) was significantly higher for students of Colour than for their White peers. This again suggests that opportunities to socialise in a positive way are very important for retention – particularly for students of Colour.

In their study, Pedler et al. (2021) found that students with none or only one parent who had attended university had significantly lower levels of belonging than those with both parents who had attended university. They noted that this likely impacts on the engagement, motivation and retention of these students. In existing studies, the focus is often on comparing students with one or more parents who had attended university with those whose parents had not attended (i.e. first-generation students). The results of this study suggest that institutions may wish to group students differently, to include students with only one parent who had attended university within their definition of ‘first-generation’ (Pedler et al., 2021). In contrast to these other studies, Zawada (2024) found no statistical difference in students who had considered dropping out of their course based on gender, age, ethnicity, or level of study.

Academic Skills Support

The social and academic variables of student life are interconnected in complex ways (Burke, 2019). To support retention, both variables must be intentionally addressed by universities and well developed (Burke, 2019). Traditionally, the support services and resources provided by universities to support retention have been on-campus and centred around face-to-face engagement for the social experience of learning (Shah et al., 2021). With the sudden shift in learning delivery due to COVID-19, new insights were seen regarding student experience issues within a wide range of discourses, including the quality of teaching, and learning and assessment support for student success (Shah et al., 2021). With online learning, teaching, feedback, and assessment components have become more powerful and valuable for student outcomes in a digital learning environment (Hooda et al., 2022). Out of necessity, academics and students had to learn new technologies to facilitate student learning (Crawford et al., 2024). As such, the support services in place before COVID were no longer fit for purpose as 24-hour services were needed, at the same efficacy and quality as before (Shah et al., 2021).

Academic engagement tends to be a key focus of universities when considering student success and retention, as it contributes to wider ideas of sense of belonging and social engagement (Shah et al., 2021). Student success, related to knowledge generation, acquisition, and academic success, requires robust frameworks of support in place for students within their institution (Emekako & Westhuizen, 2021). Some frameworks related to academic skills include academic advising, academic peer mentoring, reading centres, tutoring and workshops, and learning management system support mechanisms (Emekako & Westhuizen, 2021). Student intentions and goals shift continuously as they interact with the social and academic structures present in their institution





(Emekako & Westhuizen, 2021). As such, students without sufficient support are at a greater risk of failure and dropping out (Emekako & Westhuizen, 2021; Hoyt, 2023). Therefore, academic support systems are pivotal in supporting student retention and the academic success of students in higher education (Hoyt, 2023).

Examples of Outcomes for Retention and Success

Hoyt's (2023) study, in a North American context, found that the retention rates of their new freshmen were 56.5%; however, those students who actively participated in an Academic Performance Centre Programme, focused on tutoring and writing, had a retention difference of 14.8 pp at 71.8%. As such, they found that those students who established multiple connections with academic and support services were more likely to succeed in HE compared to those who did not, being less at risk for attrition (Hoyt, 2023). Ashton-Hay and Doncaster (2021) similarly found that those who attended academic skills sessions in their university performed better than those who did not, with increased effects seen the more a student engages. Jacobi's (2021) analysis of the literature, again, found that regular attendance in peer-assisted learning initiatives was a key predictor of success, with a particular impact on Global Majority students.

A study by Bowman et al. (2021) examined the effects of a peer-assisted learning initiative on student academic achievement and retention using a propensity score matching methodology. They found an approximately 4% retention increase for students participating, and a decrease of 25-35% in dropout, fail, withdraw and incompleteness (DFWI) grades. Like Ashton-Hay and Doncaster (2021), Hoyt (2023), and Jacobi (2022), the relationship became stronger when students attended more than five sessions. Retention rates also increased for ethnic minority students at 5-11%, compared to 3% for non-ethnic minority students (Bowman et al., 2021). Qualitative evidence from a symposium paper by Bohlmann and Kelly (2021) found that their students thought that 'learning developers' (academic skills-based helpers) were 'safe' as they normalised failure, actively listened to them, collaborated with mental health support, built an online community, and facilitated feedback (Ashton-Hay & Doncaster, 2021). As these examples illustrate, academic skills initiatives can be important predictors of student success and retention. However, little causal evidence exists to back up these claims (Ashton-Hay & Doncaster, 2021).

Academic Needs for Student Groups

Often, the students who access academic skills support are not the students most in need of such support (Bornschlegl & Caltabiano, 2022). The stigma associated with 'getting help' from academic skills support services, and the name of the provision itself, deters students as they reflect a deficit model of help seeking (Bornschlegl & Caltabiano, 2024). However, even when students do access a reasonable level of support, they do not always continue with their studies, leading to key concerns about retention and success (Jacobi, 2022). Evidence suggests that the support services provided by

universities do not fully understand students' needs, as they have become general to support a consumer and provider relationship (Hitches et al., 2024). Biases inherent within the societal and institutional structures that students move between also reduce the outcomes of certain groups, such as underrepresented minority students, students needing remedial support, and first-generation students (Jacobi, 2022). Structurally, there are barriers in place that affect underrepresented students from accessing mentorship, financial support, professional socialisation, and academic advising programmes (Stergiopoulos & Rosenberg, 2020). On an individual level, some barriers include social isolation, lack of emotional support, and discrimination (Stergiopoulos & Rosenberg, 2020). Academic support services must tackle these compounding factors to meet the needs of diverse students, who have different learning styles and development paths (Bornschlegl & Caltabiano, 2022).

Students increasingly require academic skills support, particularly in writing, as academic writing involves implicit discursive practices and hidden rules specific to disciplines (Badenhorst, 2011). Those who have the skills to write well academically, i.e., through understanding the self, authority, how language is shaped, and competing discourse requirements, can find their path through academia more enjoyable and less burdensome (Badenhorst, 2011). Academic literacies pedagogy sees the responsibility for academic intervention as more than just a 'skills' deficit model, understanding a need for short writing workshops, long sustained writing courses on genres, and writing centres (Badenhorst, 2011). However, these suggestions may not meet the needs of all students, particularly those who are underrepresented.

Intersectional Experience

Many support programmes are developed for targeted student groups; however, there is a missing link between identity and holistic support for students, which considers the wide range of challenges students face (Kezar et al., 2023). Students from a marginalised group are more likely to have intersectional identities – holding multiple marginalised subjectivities (Kezar et al., 2023). The challenges compounded for students with intersectional identities tend to include multiple responsibilities outside of HE, part-time or full-time work, or lower levels of academic preparation (Kezar et al.,





2023). As student identities uniquely intersect, they can be both a source of resilience and a barrier, informing how best a student needs support (Stergiopoulos & Rosenberg, 2020). In a health science educational context, Stergiopoulos and Rosenberg (2020) found that the enablers of success for students from underrepresented backgrounds were both positive institutional supports and flexibility.

Ajayi et al. (2021) recognise that the quantity of student interaction with faculty matters much less than the quality of interaction, with respect for student values, sincere interest in student contribution, and affirmation of student capability, able to foster student success. As such, identity development and treating students as valuable members of an academic community can have a very strong impact for retaining and facilitating student success (Ajayi et al., 2021). Kezar et al. (2023) found that combining academic and interpersonal support needs together with a student-centred approach helps to support the individual experiences of students. Some prerequisites to support include academic support staff being aware of, and knowledgeable about, cultural and social justice issues and prejudice inherent within the university system (Ajayi et al., 2021). Therefore, staff must create a supportive and inclusive culture to foster a sense of belonging among students that supports their retention (Ajayi et al., 2021). One way to foster meaning and belonging is for staff to develop student relationships between their academic experiences and life narratives (Ajayi et al., 2021). These experiences differ between underrepresented students and 'traditional' students in higher education (van Rhijn et al., 2016). Underrepresented students are more affected by their external environments compared to their counterparts, who are more affected by social integration variables like peer friendships, extracurricular activities, on-campus mechanisms – requiring different support for integration purposes (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

Mature Students

Mature students often have flexible study options and struggle to access necessary support, resources, and services (van Rhijn et al., 2016). As such, because they most often must balance study with other roles and responsibilities, and experience social exclusion, support services are not effectively designed to meet their needs (van Rhijn et al., 2016). The academic performance of mature students tends to be higher than that of younger students; however, retention rates are generally lower due to their conflicting responsibilities (van Rhijn et al., 2023). Van Rhijn et al. (2023) found that mature students in a Canadian university felt marginalised in their institution due to instructors, programmes, resources, staff, and support systems being strongly associated with younger-aged student needs (van Rhijn et al., 2023). Heagney and Benson (2017) similarly found that mature students relied heavily on family, friends, or peers for support, being reluctant to engage with formal academic support systems. One participant found communication with staff was difficult, as they were an off-campus mature student (Heagney & Benson, 2017). On a positive note, seven mature participants reported that early and prompt formal feedback helped develop their confidence and contributed to their

success (Heagney & Benson, 2017). These examples reiterate the need for diverse systems in place.

Mature students in van Rhijn et al.'s (2023) study recommended that institutions should increase the awareness of, and knowledge about, mature student needs; create flexible options for students to complete their course or programme requirements; and provide transition and programme support. Universities should also facilitate peer interaction and practical learning, offer encouragement, provide feedback and flexibility, and facilitate access to student-centred services and information for mature students (Heagney & Benson, 2017). This student-centred theme also arises in Hitches et al. (2024), with their underrepresented students wanting more personalised, accessible, and student-centred support to empower them to succeed based on their own agency. More academic support from staff is obviously valued; however, it relies on resources being available to provide equitable provision (Bornschlegl & Caltabiano, 2024).

Conclusion

Retention is a multi-faceted issue that needs to be considered from different realms of exploration. Supporting students academically, building a sense of belonging and supporting students through their different transition points are all facets of student experience that can help support diverse student needs. As underrepresented students are more at risk of attrition at Bath Spa (see section 1.4.2) (OfS, 2025), interventions and resources must target students' intersectional identities to personalise support, build positive and supportive interactions (Pitas et al., 2023), and build a desire to persist through regular in-person interactions (Tang et al., 2023). Many suggestions were considered in this review, with the heart addressing a need for equity within provision of support for retention so that all students are seen and respected within their educational experiences.





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