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*What works?* Using academic and personal tutoring to improve the engagement, belonging, retention and success of all students in higher education

# About me



- Independent researcher/consultant, Professor of Higher Education at Edge Hill University.
- Visiting Professor of Academic Development at Staffordshire University.
- Director of the *What works? Student retention and success programme*.
- Executive committee member of UKAT.
- Working with UK institutions to review and enhance academic advising and personal tutoring schemes.
- Author of ten books, journal articles and briefings.

# Overview

- UK historical and contemporary overview of academic and personal tutoring or advising in a changing context.
- Findings from the *What works? Student retention and success programme* in England, and the contribution of academic and personal tutoring.
- Examples of how institutions have used academic and personal tutoring to improve the student experience and outcomes.
- Principles to inform institutional policy and practice.
- From theory to practice: Reflections on implementing change

# UK context

- In the UK until 1970, young people did not legally become adults until the age of 21. Universities were legally *in loco parentis*, hence the development of personal tutoring and academic guidance.
- Traditional tutoring systems have come under pressure as a result of increased numbers of students, greater diversity and less resource per student (Grant 2006, Thomas 2006).
- Some form of advising system remains the norm in many modern higher education institutions, especially specialist institutions and pre-1992 universities (Grant 2006, p14), as shown in table 1 below.

# UK context

Percentage of UK HEIs with a tutoring system  
(N=78, response rate 50%).

<b>Institution type</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Pre-1992</b>	<b>86%</b>
<b>Post-1992</b>	<b>43%</b>
<b>Specialist institution or College of HE</b>	<b>91%</b>
<b>All institutions</b>	<b>74%</b>

Source: Grant 2006, p14)

# Expansion, diversity and success

- UK has an expanding and increasingly diverse student population, due to policies of expansion and widening participation.
- In England the young participation rate (YPR) is 38%; in Scotland it is 45%.
- In England the YPR is 51% in the most advantaged quintile, and 20% in the most disadvantaged quintile.
- There are policies to improve student retention, completion and outcomes.
- In England the non-continuation rate is 5.7% and the non-completion rate is 10%. There has been continual improvement over the past decade, and on-going pressure to improve.

# *What works?* Student retention and success programme

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

# Programme overview

- NAO (2007) and PAC (2008): Lack of progress and lack of evidence about what works
- Phase 1 (2008-2012): £1 million (Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE) to support 7 projects involving 22 HEIs to identify, evaluate and disseminate effective practice.
- The primary purpose of the programme is to generate robust, evidence-based analysis and evaluation about the most effective practices to ensure high continuation and completion rates.
- Phase 2 (2012-2016): Change programme involving 13 HEIs and 42 academic programmes implementing changes informed by Phase 1 and evaluating the impact.



# Key messages from Phase 1

- At the heart of student retention and success is a **strong sense of belonging in HE for all students**. This is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities that all students participate in.
- The **academic sphere is the most important site** for nurturing engagement which engenders a sense of belonging. This puts high quality **student-centred learning and teaching** at the heart of effective student retention and success.

# Student belonging

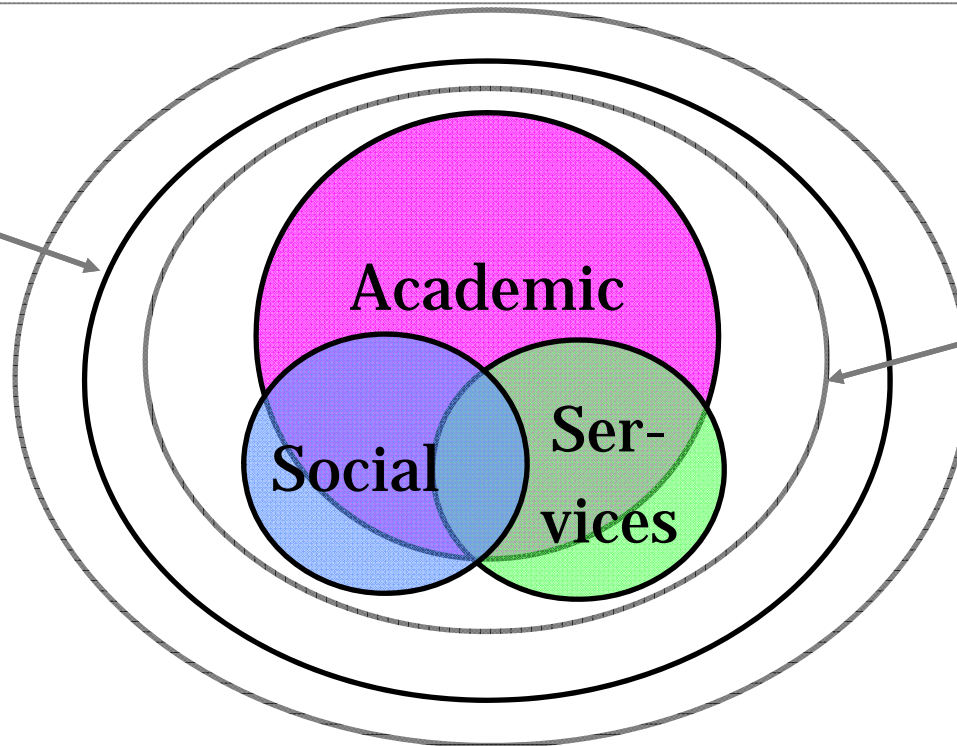
- Supportive **peer relations**.
- Meaningful **interaction between staff and students**.
- Developing **knowledge, confidence and identity** as successful HE learners.
- An HE experience which is **relevant to interests and future goals**.

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Institutional management and co-ordination

Staff  
capacity  
building

Student  
capacity  
building



**Early engagement extends into HE and beyond**

# Awareness and use of services

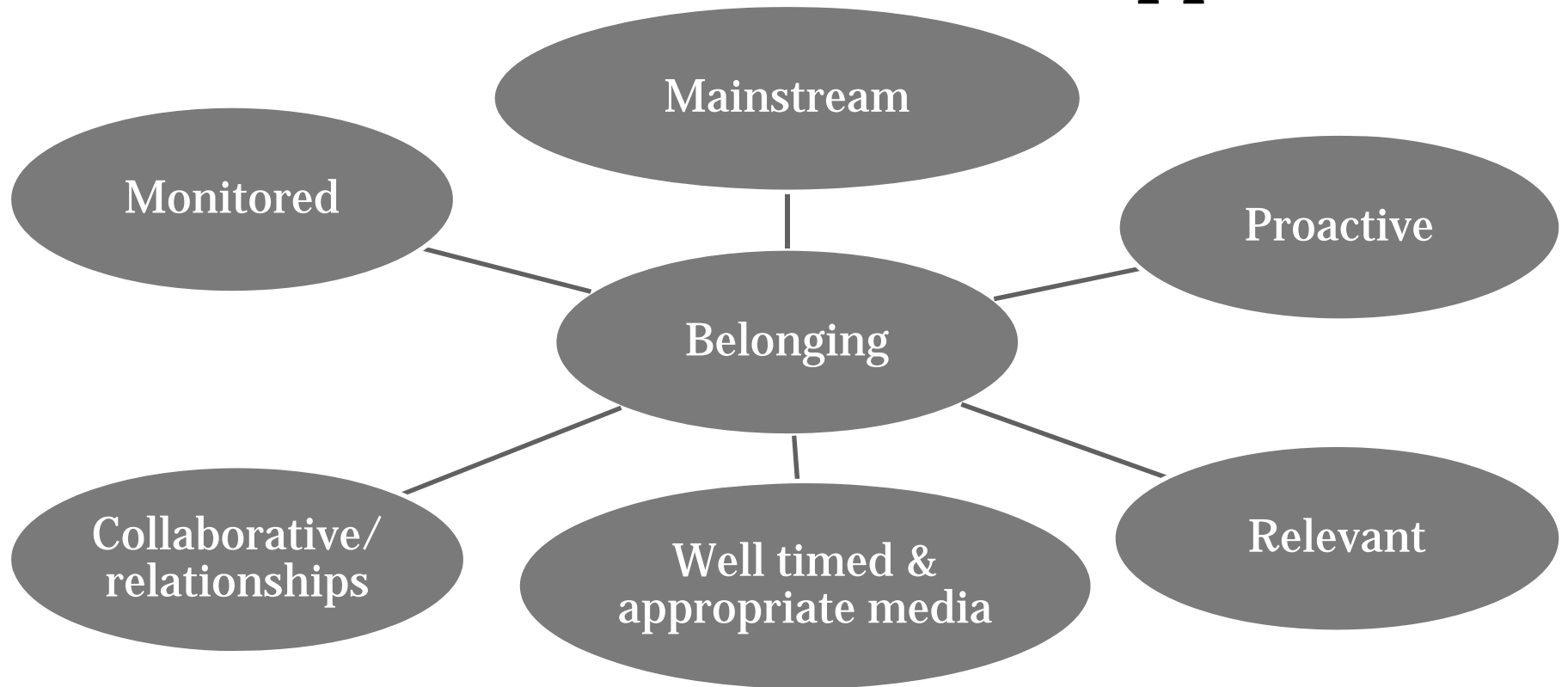
- Majority of the students aware of: financial support; careers and employment; counselling; study skills as part of timetabled sessions; study skills beyond timetabled sessions; IT support and skills; library services; and students' union-based services.
- Majority were not aware of: money advice; disability services; services supporting religion or belief; advisors and wellbeing services; student mentoring.
- **Men report using academic development services considerably less than women: up to *11 percentage points* less for 'frequent' or 'occasional use'.**

## What the men said:

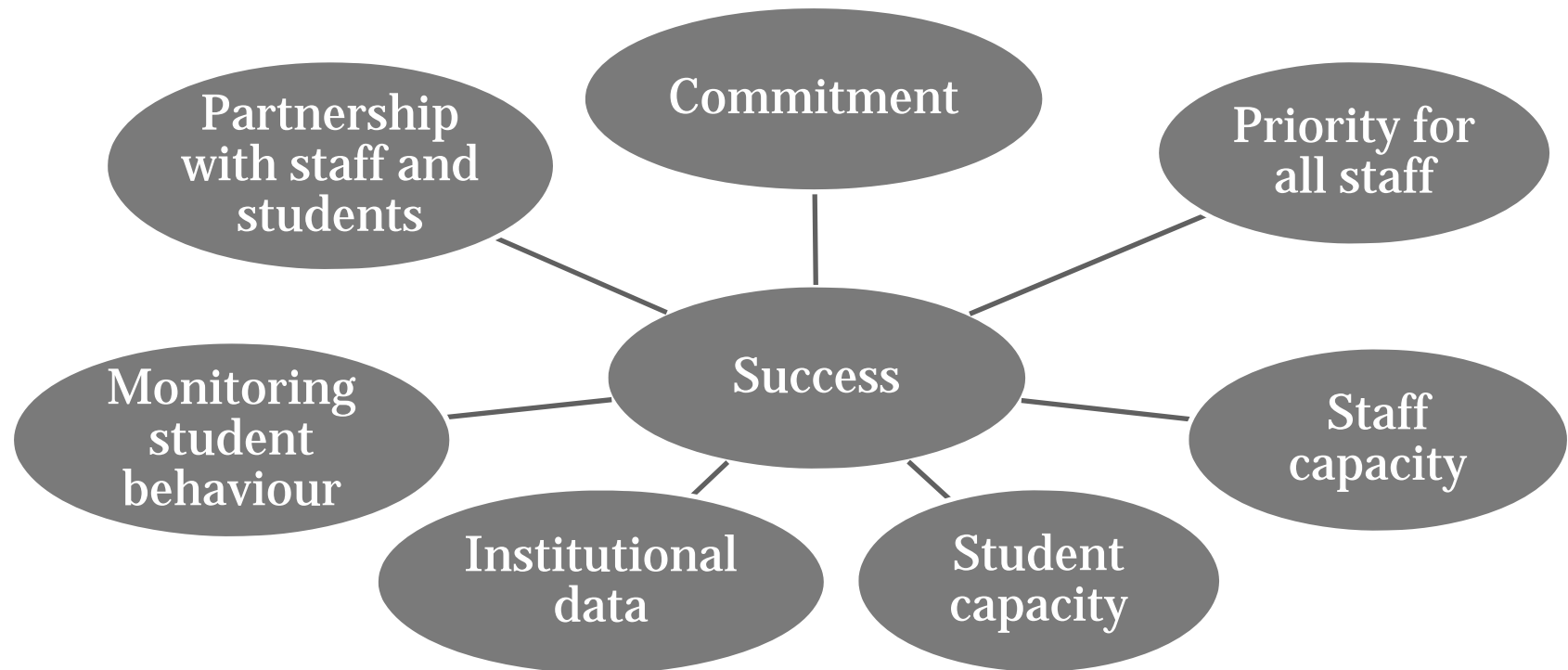
*“Um, I don’t really like it. That, and I don’t think I have had a great need, I don’t think I’ve struggled too much. But I wouldn’t want to do it unless I really needed it, but I don’t feel like I have.”*

*“I’ve got a group of friends in the university where if I’ve got an issue, and it’s suitable to ask them then I’d ask them first. If they couldn’t resolve it I’d then go to a tutor. If it couldn’t be resolved by a tutor then I’d go to the next level in the department. But I can’t even think what would be so important as to take it that far”.*

# Characteristics of effective approaches



## Strategic enablers



## What works process

Implement-  
ation (activity)

Engagement  
and belonging  
(outcomes)

Retention and  
success  
(impact)

S t r a t e g i c e n a b l e r s



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# Academic and personal advising/tutoring

# Student stories activity

- Listen to this student's experience in higher education.
- Make a note of the challenges that he encountered.
- Consider how your institution's approach would have identified and supported this student.

# Connor's story

- Connor is the first person in his family to go to higher education, and he came straight from school. He decided to study computer science as he wanted to do something different from school. He has a computer at home that he spends hours on everyday. He is very good at computers, and is often asked to help other people set up their computers, upgrade them, and solve problems.
- When Connor arrived at college he found the size of the classes very big, and he would have liked to have spent more time on the computers while he was being taught. The course content was not really what he had expected, and in his first year he struggled with certain aspects of it.

## Connor said:

*I was used to having close relationships with teachers and lecturers, but it was more distant. There were lots of people in the lectures, and it was hard to speak to the lecturers. If I had any problems it was hard to get them sorted. The classes were just so big. The lecturers were always busy doing something else. They never had time. There was always someone else talking to them. I didn't feel comfortable approaching them, I didn't want to feel like an idiot.*

# Connor's story continued

- Connor socialised with his friends from school who came here, but they were studying other subjects. They seemed to have much more spare time than him. Soon he found that if he missed a class to spend time with them, or because he'd been out the night before, nobody seemed to notice.
- Connor wondered if he should have tried to get a job instead of studying, or perhaps he had chosen the wrong course. Eventually he went to see the Programme Leader, who helped him fill out the forms to leave. He still wonders if a different course, such as business studies, would have suited him better, but he found it difficult to know what to choose the first time, so it might not be better again... He already feels like a waster.

## Connor said:

*I told my friends. They weren't happy, they wanted me to stay. Mam and Dad were alright but they did want me to stick the first year out. I just thought there was no point in doing it... Whenever you tell anybody you're leaving they just think you are a waster.*

*The first real experience you have of seeing what is done course-wise is when you actually start university. At the Open Days there are no real examples of work to show you... Whenever people go on Open Days from school they're just happy to be out of school and they don't really know what to ask... I don't know how I would find out about business studies now...'*

## Briefly discuss:

1. What were the problems that Connor faced?
2. How and when would your system have noticed that Connor was struggling and not sure about his course choice?
3. What would happen next?
4. How would you ensure that Connor engaged with the support available?

# Evidence from *What works?*

Advisers can improve student retention and success in the following ways:

- Enabling students to develop a relationship with an academic member of staff in their discipline or programme area, and feeling more ‘connected’;
- Providing students with reassurance, guidance and feedback about their academic studies in particular, and working in partnership with professional services.



# Role and benefits of tutor/adviser

The 'anchor', or a stable point of contact between the student and the institution (Wheeler and Birtle 1993). More specifically:

1. First point of contact
2. Provision of information
3. Academic support and development
4. Employability and professional development
5. Personal welfare support
6. Referral to further information and support
7. Identifying and supporting students at risk of withdrawing;
8. Relationship with member of staff , promoting integration and belonging

## Evidence from *What works?*

- At one university (Foster et al 2012) 65% (n=111) of a survey sample found their personal tutor (academic adviser) encouraging and 58% (n=99) received useful advice.
- At a second university (McCary et al 2011) students who had thought about leaving were less likely to think that their personal tutor (academic adviser) was easily available and also were less likely to say that their tutor/adviser was easily approachable.

# Evidence from *What works?*

- Students prefer to receive their academic development and support within their academic department (Project 3);
- Sharing concerns allows students to realise that many of their worries about studying are normal and/or shared by others (Projects 2 and 6);
- Enabling students to understand academic development, to reflect on their learning and to undertake follow-up work is beneficial (Project 4);
- Advisers emerged as a popular and effective way of receiving academic development and support. Preferred source of help and advice for study concerns (60%, n=335) (Project 1);
- Peer mentoring can also provide students with access to useful academic development and support (Project 2).

<b>PASS Scheme Implementation</b>	Group tutorials developing academic skills and relationships with staff and students.
<b>Mainstream</b>	Part of the compulsory skills module.
<b>Proactive</b>	All students participate; those who are failing are followed up one-to-one.
<b>Relevant</b>	Assessed coursework set through PASS contributes 30% of the module assessment.
<b>Well-timed &amp; appropriate media</b>	Meet 4-5 times per semester; more frequent meeting in first semester. Face-to-face and text book.
<b>Collaborative</b>	Emphasis on learning with each other and from each other.
<b>Monitored</b>	Attendance monitored and followed-up.

<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>Student survey, interviews, focus groups; attendance monitoring; and data.</b>
<b>Peer relations</b>	<b>Students learn from each other and feel more confident.</b>
<b>Interaction with staff</b>	<b>89% reported sufficient contact with staff through PASS; 88% confident now to ask for academic help.</b>
<b>Developing capacity</b>	<b>Develop skills of all students; including failing students.</b>
<b>Relevant to current/future goals.</b>	<b>Taught by academics from their discipline, so perceived as relevant</b>
<b>Sense of belonging</b>	<b>Shows that the department cares/they belong.</b>
<b>Retention &amp; success</b>	<b>83% in 2004-05 to 92% in 2007-08.</b>

# Student voices

- [We] learn how others are feeling about the course and how they are getting on. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly and that helps everyone have a voice, which is important for those who wouldn't speak up in a lecture.
- Made me feel... that there were people to talk to if needed.
- I feel it is a great system to get to know your academic advisor and this makes me feel more involved in the Life Science department.

# Models of tutoring/advising

1. Traditional **pastoral** model;
2. A model based on providing **professional** support services; and
3. An integrated **curriculum** model.

Findings from the *What works?* programme align with the integrated curriculum model.

<b>Attribute/Model</b>	<b>Pastoral</b>	<b>Professional</b>	<b>Curriculum</b>
Timetabled sessions	No	Maybe	Yes
All students benefit from advising	Maybe	No	Yes
Structured curriculum for staff and students	No	No	Yes
Student develops relationship with adviser	Maybe	No	Yes
Student develops relationships with peers	No	Maybe	Maybe
Referrals to other services	Maybe	Yes	Maybe



# **Eleven Elements of Effective Advising**

1. Delivered locally and embedded into or aligned with the academic programme.
2. Proactive: e.g. scheduled meetings, and/or a requirement to attend.
3. Sessions have an explicit academic purpose for all students (i.e. to maximise the success of all students).
4. Front loading of input, including early sessions with students, and more meetings in the first year than subsequent years.
5. A system that allows students to develop a relationship with academic staff, and enabling the adviser to get to know the students.
6. Organised and taught in such a way that enables students to get to know other students studying on the same programme.

# **Eleven Elements of Effective Advising**

7. Contributes to identifying students at risk, e.g. through reviewing engagement and grades across the programme of study.
8. Provides access to (either directly or through referral) additional academic support and development to improve academic capacity and performance.
9. Partnership with professional services and other initiatives to provide additional pastoral support and social integration.
10. Underpinned by appropriate support for staff, including time allocation, support and development and reward and recognition.
11. Regularly monitored and evaluated in terms of engagement by students, quality of advisers and outcomes for retention and success.

## **Phase 2: From theory to practice**

**‘Most institutions have not yet been able to translate what we know about student retention into forms of action that have led to substantial gains in student persistence and graduation.’**

(Professor Vincent Tinto HEA retention conference 2006)

# *What works?* Change programme

- Working with 13 HEIs across the UK over 3+ years.
- Each institution is implementing changes in 3 disciplines.
- Changes: induction; active learning, teaching and assessment; co-curricular activities.
- Institutions are also identifying and addressing strategic enablers.
- Mixed methods evaluation: process and impact of change.
- Partners: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Higher Education Academy and Action Access.

# Emerging lessons about change

- Senior management commitment is vital. There are many competing priorities for staff so they must feel improving student outcomes is a high priority. Workload allocation models and reward and recognition demonstrate this commitment.
- Cross-institutional teams are invaluable, as partnerships and alliances are needed across the institution.
- Academic staff engagement is challenging, requiring a range of tactics: e.g. champions, evidence and ownership. Staff belonging can be an issue.
- Student involvement in change processes can be difficult to establish, but can be powerful. Needs to move beyond student representatives.
- Evidence is essential to bring wider engagement, and underpin change.

# Conclusions

- Belonging is key to improving student retention and success.
- Belonging is in the result of peer relations, interaction with staff, developing the capacity to be an effective learner and have a relevant HE experience.
- Personal tutoring/academic advising is able to contribute to student belonging in many ways.
- But tutoring/advising must be: mainstream for all students, embedded into the curriculum, proactive (i.e. not optional), made relevant to students and valued by staff, uses appropriate media, is collaborative and develops relationships, and participation is monitored and non-participation is followed up.

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- Thank you for listening.
- Please get in touch if you would like to discuss anything:  
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