How to increase student retention and success: A systematic, evidence- informed approach

Author

Helen Anderson
Email Helen at Helen.anderson@boppoly.ac.nz

Introduction

The work at Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) described in this paper was prompted by concerns about the unevenness of the student outcomes from its programmes in terms of retention and success for students. In particular, MIT's mean enrolled/ pass rate for programmes at this time was 70% with a range of 29% - 93%. The goal for the mean rate was to reach 80% over three years, which was achieved through the process described here.

This publication describes MIT's approach to establishing effective organisational practices to improve retention and success within the New Zealand context and with reference to the international research. While this is the story of one organisation, its journey is likely to be applicable to any organisation wanting to engage in systemic change to improve student retention and success.

The Problem

High levels of student retention, success and completion of courses and qualifications is fundamental to effective tertiary education. The link between effective tertiary education and economic development is well evidenced. Equally important is the obligation to the student and the public to provide value for their investment (Education Counts, 2008).

In New Zealand, key indicators of effective delivery in the polytechnic sector are provided through the Tertiary Education Commission's publication of rates of course completion, progression to higher levels of study, qualification completion and retention in study. These Educational Performance Indicators (EPIs) demonstrate that the effectiveness of the polytechnic sector is variable. The problem for ITPs, therefore, is how to improve their educational performance and maintain excellence (TEC, 2012.)

In looking for a workable strategy to improve programme performance organisations have to overcome the problem of the power of anecdotal, subjective driven reasons why students fail in such numbers in tertiary education. The reasons are generally located with student non-performance and many

unsupported assumptions made by staff about the student cohort. Some of this reasoning runs as follows:

- Students don't get the secondary education they used to so they are not prepared for tertiary study
- external factors are the primary reason why students fail
- Students are not as committed as they used to be.

This type of thinking acts as a block to addressing issues of the effectiveness of programme design and delivery where the blame for poor student outcomes is assigned solely to students. This was MIT's experience. Therefore, alongside identifying in a clear measurable way at course level that there was an issue with retention and success, a thorough review of relevant research was necessary to help move on from anecdotal solutions and to develop systematic approaches that generated improved outcomes led by those doing the teaching.

Pressure to improve student outcomes has the potential to produce perverse behaviours such as lowering standards or recording inflated results. The measures to ensure this doesn't happen are as follows:

- a robust moderation process with regular external participation,

- practical help to lift results through programme improvement (It is not useful to require improved outcomes if there is no process available to show lecturers how to do this),

- transparent availability of outcomes data through tabling at Academic Board to ensure that there is sufficient scrutiny to both deter inappropriate behaviours and to identify and challenge outcomes that are outside of expected trends and,

- establishment of a culture of continuous improvement as opposed to a culture of shame and blame.

MIT achieved the first three measures and had made progress on the fourth in the timeframe referred to in this paper (2007 – 2010).

What does the literature say?

The numbers

David Scott's analyses of the retention and completion of qualifications in New Zealand tertiary education was a very productive reminder (Education Counts, 2003) of the extraordinary numbers of people who begin to study but never complete. While the TEC EPIs demonstrate that there is progress to address this problem, there are still large numbers of students entering tertiary education and experiencing significant failure.

The causes

Research into retention and success has produced a range of possible causes and ways of addressing the issues (Zepke, Leach, &, Anderson, 2008). While this work provides many insights, the missing element is how to convert this into an institute wide strategy that could be implemented as part of the "business as usual" of programme delivery and evaluation – essential for busy lecturers, particularly important in times of tight resources and to ensure a sustainable level of performance The literature provides evidence of organisation level attempts to address poor retention and success but these have generally been focussed on one or two "fixes" (Zepke et al, 2008).

An early intervention that provided clues to a way forward (Johnson, 1999) was carried out at Napier University in Scotland, in this study analyses of student achievement data and administrative data on University admission processes identified that there was a link between student achievement and administrative flexibility around student choice of courses and the facility for students to change courses. This work shifted the focus from blaming students to evaluating organisational processes and their effectiveness. Further, The Higher Education EvidenceNet (2009) is an example of a website that has expanded this approach and offers a website collecting evidence of organisation and programme-based interventions to improve student retention and success.

The work of Vincent Tinto (Tinto,1987 for example) over many years prompts us to think about student engagement as critical to success in study. His recurring theme of social and academic engagement and the importance of these two aspects to the enduring connection between students and their success has also been very influential in focussing on the quality of the programmes in which students study.

Taken as a whole, it is evident from the literature that there are many elements to achieving excellent retention, success and progression and that focussing on single elements is unhelpful. The literature variously identifies:

- mismatched recruitment
- inappropriate entry requirements
- inappropriate course length and credit distribution
- weak induction and orientation
- poor placement processes
- inadequate teaching including a mono-cultural response to diversity
- poor assessment design
- a weak focus on progression to further study and/or work

Unproductive attitudes

The work of Maynard and Martinez (2002) draws attention to the link between lecturer attitudes and programme performance improvement. They identified ways of thinking that were associated with improving programme performance and ways of thinking that blocked improvement and were associated with declining performance. In summary, successful programmes were associated with lecturers who:

- Work in autonomous, self-monitoring teams
- Have complementary skills and commitment to all students

- Respond positively to staff development and management processes
- Recruit students with integrity
- Identify at risk students early and address literacy and numeracy
- Believe in preparing student centred schemes of work
- Have high quality induction programmes
- Ensure assessment is rigorous and that students have a clear understanding…and enable students to experience early success
- Value students as individuals
- Particularly value student feedback and observation of classes

Unsuccessful programmes were associated with lecturers who:

- Tend to be complacent about their role
- Will belong to a team where morale is low with elements of staleness and negativity
- See work related problems as beyond their control
- Recruit without integrity and expect a high drop-out rate
- Tend to stereotype students by class, gender, race and ability
- Suggest they do not have time to identify or support at risk students
- Convey negative attitudes to students
- Have a relatively negative view of 16-19 year old students' abilities
- Tend not to review the curriculum – lack of preparation
- Do not regard assessment and feedback as a priority – blame students for their lack of ability and failure to produce assignments on time
- Are particularly negative about college quality systems
- Blame management pressure and lack of time for their inability to plan(Maynard & Martinez, 2002)

An evidence-based solution

The following describes the Manukau Institute of Technology journey from 2007 to 2010 to improve the performance of its programmes to ensure that every student would have the best possible experience of success in their tertiary education.

The Issue

The driver for this work was the low retention and success outcomes for many MIT programmes. MIT's mean pass rate for programmes at this time was 70% with a range of 29% - 93%; the goal for the mean rate was to reach 80% over three years and to reduce the tail so that no programme fell below 70% However, the first step in addressing this issue was to be aware of it in its fullest, most measurable description and the available data was not always helpful. The reporting focus had been on complete/pass rates i.e. pass rates of those who sat the final assessments, which were generally very high. However, they did not reflect the number of students who dropped out before the final assessment

(and who did not, therefore, complete the course) [1]. Further, it should be noted that the use of averages for overall programme performance draws attention away from individual course performance (individual courses ranged from 19% - 100%). Courses can be very low performing but part of an acceptable programme statistic resulting in significant amounts of unacknowledged student failure. Thus, the "tough" measure of pass rates for all those who enrolled in a course (enrolled/pass rates) became the focus to ensure that programme performance took into account all students who were attending at the end of week 2 [2].

The TEC shift in approach described above and an organisational drive to be more evidence-based generated a search for effective practice. MIT had always been a student focussed organisation and the shift in practices was built on this commitment.

Piloting the solution

The author of this paper worked with the institute Kaiarahi, The Academic Development Centre staff and programme leaders to craft an approach based on international research and evidence. The first part of this approach was to design a conceptual model that could provide a framework for action. Having identified a problem, the important next step was to build the language, ideas and evidence that would make it possible for the problem to be discussed and acted on by those who would be carrying out the intervention. This was essential to disrupt the student blame approach discussed above.

The outcome of the search for a workable model was the development of the Student Cycle Programme Improvement Strategy. This was significantly different from the existing approaches and needed a considerable attitude shift to be implemented successfully. This approach inquired systematically into each element of the students' engagement with the programme to consider, based on evidence, what was working well and what needed changing. The eight key elements identified are:

- *Recruitment*: Are the recruitment processes presenting a realistic picture of what the programme is about and requires of students?

- *First Contact:* Is there a rapid response system for students who make enquiries that includes accurate and informative information about the programme as well as making students feel valued?

- *Orientation:* Being mindful of the importance of academic and social engagement , does the orientation process create the necessary connectors?

- *Diagnostics/ Placements:* Is enough work done to ensure that students are placed in the appropriate level for them to begin achieving immediately?

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[1] Week 2 was the cut off period where student can withdraw from a course with a full fees refund.
[2] Week 2 was the cut off period where student can withdraw from a course with a full fees refund.

- *Learning and Teaching (pedagogies)*: Are classes well taught such that student satisfaction is high and graduate are well received in their industries.

- *Assessment:* Is there an assessment design across the whole programme that works both formatively and summatively?

- *Pastoral Care:* Is the support available to students appropriate to their needs and connected to the point of delivery?

- *Destinations (Work, Further Study):* Does the programme instil confidence into students that the study they are doing will help them to their career goals?

For example, the assessment for a course may be too high stakes at the start, the induction may not have given students a clear picture of the course requirements, the teaching may be consistently poor based on student evaluations, there may be resource issues and so on.

During the development time and then through two trial interventions (see page 6*ff.*), these elements were evaluated persistently to ensure they were relevant and that changes made contributed to improvements in the quality of the programme. The complexity of researching single elements in this context is acknowledged and thus the evidence of effectiveness is at the level of a process intervention measured by the improvement of enrolled/pass rates. A more controlled and refined study may produce evidence of the relative importance of different elements through factor analysis but it would be unlikely this could be controlled for context, thus, process rather than elements was seen as the way forward and has proved effective while not ruling out the possibility of adding or changing elements.

To guide the process a cycle of self evaluation was employed and used with each of the eight elements of student engagement derived from the literature (*e.g.* Kuh,2009, NZCER, 2012) and the internal evaluation during implementation noted above. To summarise the eight elements included (see Appendix II):
- recruitment
- first contact with learners
- orientation
- using diagnostics/placements
- improving teaching and learning
- improving assessment
- pastoral care
- understanding destinations

For each element the process involved describing practices and then evaluating evidence (or gathering if none was yet available), in order to make an informed judgement as to whether the practice was effective or needed to be changed. The template guides this describing, considering evidence, evaluating and then creating an evidence informed plan. Figure 1 below offers a visual image of the continuous improvement process that underpins this approach.

Figure 1: Continuous Improvement Cycle

The continuous improvement approach is in contrast to assuming that a high failure rate is entirely because of poor students or student circumstances – in principle a 75% or later 80% pass rate allows 20-25% for uncontrollable aspects – the rest is about programme excellence. The evidence for this assertion comes from the variable success rates of programmes with comparable demographics particularly with reqard to deprivation factors. Thus, across MIT there were programmes that had cohorts of students with similar demographics that might be seen as impacting on success (ethnicity, age, residence,) the independent variable thus was the quality of the programme.

To put all these ideas and activities into a comprehensive approach and to trial it, a pilot intervention was designed. This was carried out with 18 underperforming programmes and a subsequent replication intervention including 13 programmes. The outcome of these studies was that in the first pilot of the 18 programmes:

- 15 showed significant improvement (at a rate above that of the institute programmes as a group),
- two remained the same
- one declined using enrolled/pass rates as the measure.

Following the first pilot, the author and the development team reviewed all the processes and outcomes and refined the intervention. A key change was to include staff from successful programmes in the workshops (see Step 3 below) to make sure there was positive generation of ideas, and to ensure that each programme team had a mentor to attend the meetings between workshops (see Step 3 below). In the second intervention:

- 11 programmes improved
- one remained the same
- one declined (this was the same programme as in the first pilot, this programme proceeded to formal review).

Trialling of the workshop process occurred concurrent with the development of the organisation's approach to the new SAEER quality assurance requirements (the "Retention and Success" strategy sits very much in context of a self-evaluation ethos) and with the TEC shift to calculating and publishing EPIs for each organisation. These two events supported and enhanced the focus on retention and success and where conceptually very in tune with the model.

The pilot studies described above demonstrated the effectiveness of an approach that focussed on:

- programme improvement using the student cycle of engagement
- lecturer ownership of the process
- collaboration across successful and unsuccessful programmes
- completeness of institutional processes (business as usual)
- an evidence, analysis, plan, implement, evaluation cycle

With the process thus refined it became routine to use the steps described below as the required action for all programmes scoring below the institute benchmark and for those that were declining.

The outcome for MIT was that by the end of 2010 the mean enrolled/pass rate for programmes was over 80% with no programme below 62% and working towards no courses below 50%, demonstrating excellent progress to wards the goals and a well evidenced process available for addressing programmes and courses that underperform.

The Solution in Action

The following provides readers with a series of steps that could be taken to implement a programme improvement approach to addressing the issue of underperforming programmes. Each step mirrors the implementation process carried out at MIT and is described as a chronological process for the convenience of readers wishing to implement this process in their own organisations.

STEP 1: Leadership Commitment

Identify institute KPIs and ensure that the institute leadership supports this approach to improving performance. This can be done via a presentation to the leadership group. Copy appropriate directors into communications regarding the workshops below (Step 3) provides positive messaging for staff.

STEP 2: Information and Action

Develop an annual programme data sheet that provides easily readable data as follows: student numbers and enrolled /pass rates for the last four years in total and across target groups (FT/PT, School Leavers, Youth Guarantee, SDR ethnic categories, international – see the example provided Appendix II). This data sheet doubles as the data sheet for the programme programme reports. This was one of the most critical moments in creating a process that had strength and reliability. The data sheets provide an unarguable description of the outcomes of a programme and make it possible to identify successes as they occur in measurable, overt evidence thus creating ownership and confidence among programme staff (See an example in Appendix I).

An improvement would be to provide an easily accessible, regularly updated electronic data panel to support regular debate about achievement.

All programmes with enrolled/pass averages below 50% are reviewed for closure, or participation in a programme development workshop as below. All courses within programmes with an enrolled/pass rate of under 65% are reviewed for closure, or participation in an development workshop as below.

STEP 3: Workshops

Run a series of workshops with a mix of programme leaders from successful and unsuccessful programmes as follows (see discussion about the development of the workshop process above). Buy in to this approach is achieved through leadership support provided as above and by characterising these workshops as supporting programme leaders and lecturers to design and implement their own improvement plans rather than a directive approach that does not offer constructive actions to take.

Workshop 1

Attendees are programme leaders from programmes that have not met the initial enrolled/pass rates established as KPIs by the organisation's leadership and programme leaders from programmes that have been successful. Twenty in each occurrence seems to be effective

Present the data sheets for all programmes represented at the workshop, discuss how to read them and what the data means in context of the institute KPIs. The MIT experience was that data sheets needed to be very readable and some discussion needed to occur for staff to be confident with the information and its meanings.

Clarify that the external factors contributing to student failure (ill health, family issues, pregnancy, other commitments) are a given, the task for the workshops is to create the strongest programmes possible not to avoid the responsibility of the programme deliverers to maximise success. A focus on what "can" be changed is helpful here. Note the discussion above on the evidence of achievement in successful programmes compared with unsuccessful programmes where the demographics and range of external pressures are the same.

Present a brief overview of latest research on retention and success. Present the "Student Cycle" template (Appendix II) and discuss principles and practice of implementation.

Identify the participant's task to be completed before the next workshop. The task is to meet with their lecturing team and consider each element of the student cycle, identify data/material that might give evidence of the effectiveness of strategies for each element, identify gaps in available evidence. Make a plan to fill evidence gaps. Where evidence is available fill in the cells on the appropriate cells on the Student Cycle template. This is the start of an action plan.

Workshop 2

This was conducted three weeks later – which is enough time to carry out the task described above and not so long as to lose interest

Break the workshop participants into groups of four mixing successful programmes with unsuccessful programmes. The small group task is to compare plans, discuss strategies and to learn from each other. It is helpful here to include facilitators/mentors for the small groups, these might be academic advisors, members of the institute's leadership, senior managers and others with standing in the organisation. As an outcome of the report back from groups establish a timetable of activities as requested by workshop participants to focus on effective strategies (these may be workshops, guests, visits, facilitated discussions).

The task for programme leaders from this workshop is to go back to the lecturing team, complete the template together and table it with the programme committee for oversight of implementation, to be embedded in the Annual Programme Report, and to be sent to the workshop leader by an appropriate due date (plan to be finished within three weeks, plans to be actioned as per planned schedule).

Workshops 3 - 5

Workshops, guest, visits, facilitated discussions facilitated by the workshop leader and encouraging participants to initiate and invite colleagues. The MIT experience of these was that the most successful and appreciated activities were when programme staff from different faculties and disciplines got together to share practices. The workshops fostered across-institute collaboration on authentic tasks (*i.e.* the improvement of programmes).

Continuous Improvement (or how to achieve sustainability).

The above activity generates current and satisfying action because programme teams are given the tools to carry out programme improvement and they own the process of building their competence and the effectiveness of their programmes. This meets the shared goal of ensuring high rates of student success. However, this will only create a short term response if this work is not built into institute process and is thus business as usual. See the next section for a summary of essential sustainability actions. The content of this section of the publication is drawn from the MIT experience and discussions with implementers in a range of ITPs.

Critical to success in establishing high performance of programmes and thus high rates of success for students sustainability over time is an attitudinal shift (and see the discussion above). This shift is from "rescuing and blaming" and the inaction that results from such attitudes to a commitment to evidence based continuous improvement. This commitment is expressed in a series of actions that shift an organisation from a time bound focus on better outcomes to an organisational process that delivers responsiveness, accountability and persistent success.

At the heart of this approach is the determination of an organisation's leadership to expect high performance and act when this expectation is not met. (Leadership commitment is discussed above). While a united approach from the leadership team is essential, the success of this approach is also dependent on having a champion within the leadership team who maintains the overall strategy and links effectively with implementing staff.

Organisational Processes

The following identifies institute processes used by MIT and a variety of organisations to ensure sustainability:

Academic Policies

Rewrite the academic policies to embed the principles of continuous improvement and to identify the actions that must be taken when a programme does not meet institute benchmarks. Many institutes now have policies derived from the continuous improvement approaches of the SAEER cycle of quality management required by NZQA and these serve both purposes.

Annual Academic Plan

Develop an Annual Academic Plan that is reported to Academic Board and to Council that identifies annual targets for Academic Performance and the strategies for achieving these. At MIT this plan was developed annually under close consultation with Faculties and its outcomes were reported back to Academic Board in an annual cycle.

Annual Programme Reports

An Annual Programme Report that includes action plans and their outcomes developed in the workshop process described above.

An annual action cycle where annual programme reports are discussed by Heads of School/Deans with the Academic Leadership where plans to address low performing programmes are agreed to, recorded, actioned and followed up. Actions may include formal review, programme improvement workshop, closing the course or programme.

Professional Development

An outcome of the MIT focus on the quality of programmes through the programme improvement strategy has heightened interest in professional development opportunities. To ensure sustainability of the focus on self determination for lecturers in their quest to improve student outcomes, it becomes important to provide excellent professional development that is forward thinking and innovative. Therefore, strengthen access to and quality of professional development of lecturers to support the skill sets and capabilities essential to reaching and sustaining a high level of programme/student success.

Industry Engagement

The programme improvement process (especially the last element) highlighted the need for a strong industry engagement process to ensure student confidence in the relevance of the programme to their career goals. This prompted a rebuild of the industry engagement process to ensure that programmes are current, relevant and engaging. In essence, this means moving away from overly general student destination surveys that do not meet the test of "Does this provide information that can be used to improve programmes?" replaced by programme level destination studies. This also meant that the traditional Industry Advisory Committee was challenged and there was a shift to implementing engagement processes tailored to the location and industry that do meet this test.

Appraisal– work to come

Rewrite the annual appraisal cycle criteria for lecturers to reflect the learning and teaching values of the organisation as they are needed to develop and deliver excellent programmes that have high rates of student success. This aspect of sustainability has complexities that mean there are aspirations but not good examples, without this step, the focus on quality can be diverted by issues of funding, unions and competing priorities. In an ideal world the capabilities and competencies that make up an appraisal process would reflect those that make up excellent teaching. This creates difficulties of measurement and it may take significant organisational maturity to appraise on a values - based approach rather than a tick box.

Summary

The outcome of this work at MIT to the end of 2010 has been a significant improvement in programme performance across all programmes evidenced in the TEC EPIs for 2010 where the goal of 80% mean pass rate was achieved. Any programme falling below benchmarks was inquired into promptly, responsibility for programme outcomes sat with those who are best placed to generate improvement i.e. the programme committee and the lecturing staff and there is a sense of ownership across the staff.

The new approach across 2007 - 2010 was characterised by a "join up the dots" strategy that needs every element in place – accurate accessible data, well informed effort on programme improvement, significant professional development, requirement to report and an attitude that when things go wrong they should be inquired into and decisions made based on evidence (not the traditional "sweep it under the carpet" approach or "blame the student").

The Author
Helen Anderson was Academic Director at MIT 2006 – 2011 and is currently Academic Director at Bay of Plenty Polytechnic

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Appendix I

Annual Programme Report and Programme Improvement Workshop Data Sheet

Information to be obtained from Jasper reports only	2007		2006		2005		2004		2003	
Total EFTS	73		78		52		115		65	
Number of Students	216		159		185		213		199	
Percentage of part time enrolments*	73.15		42.14		44.86		17.37		10.55	
Percentage of fulltime enrolments	26.85		57.86		55.14		82.63		89.45	
Number of school leavers	18		14		13		21		13	
Number of people with disabilities	4		5		4		1		1	
Gender	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Male	102	47.22	60	37.74	83	44.86	116	54.46	97	48.74
Female	114	52.78	99	62.26	102	55.14	97	45.54	102	51.26
Ethnicity (use MOE category only)	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
NZ European/Pakeha	0	0	1	0.63	2	1.08	1	0.47	0	0
NZ Māori	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pacific Island	15	6.94	8	5.03	7	3.78	4	1.88	3	1.51
Asian	172	79.63	120	75.47	155	83.78	189	88.73	179	89.95
Indian	8	3.7	5	3.14	5	2.7	4	1.88	8	4.02
Other	21	9.72	25	15.72	16	8.65	15	7.04	9	4.52
International students	41	18.98	32	20.13	27	14.59	41	19.25	43	21.61

Appendix II

Programme Improvement Template.

THE STUDENT CYCLE

A Programme Improvement Approach to Retention and Success

OVERVIEW :   PRINCIPLES :

Recruitment   Continuous Improvement
First Contact   Collection and use of evidence to inform action
Orientation   and evaluate action
Diagnostics/ Placements   Definition and Acceptance of Responsibility
Learning and Teaching   and its boundaries
Assessment   Focus on strengthening student engagement
Pastoral Care
destinations (work, further study)

ACTION
Set up a meeting with your programme team and anyone
else you think will be a source of useful contribution
Analyse the programme data sheet
Analyse the Student Cycle
        Bring your Student Cycle plan to the next
workshop
.   Time :
    Date
    Venue

ELEMENTS OF THE STUDENT CYCLE:			
Element	Evidence	Actions	Evaluate
RECRUITMENT	Examples • Call centre stats • Review of applications • Yr to Yr comparisons		
FIRST CONTACT	Examples • Conversion rates • Student survey		
ORIENTATION	Examples • Student Feedback		
DIAGNOSTICS PLACEMENTS	Examples • Calibration Study • Destination		
TEACHING AND LEARNING	Examples • Student evaluations • Attendance • Course results		
ASSESSMENT	Examples • Plan includes early warning • Early team scrutiny of results • Moderation		
PASTORAL CARE	Examples • Student awareness of services (survey) • Lecturer awareness of services (survey) • Programme Focussed Provision		
DESTINATIONS	Examples • Destination studies • Industry engagement		