

**Student Retention in Further Education: A Case Study**

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## Abstract

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The aim of the study was to identify factors affecting student retention on level 3 programmes at Olympic College based in Yorkshire, England. It has been identified that similar colleges in the UK have retention rates above 95% although Olympic College is retaining 88% of its learners in the most successful subject areas. This study was guided by the methods of Martinez and Munday's (1998) 9000 Voices study, which investigates student persistence and dropout in Further Education. This study used 9000 participants making it the largest research project to focus on the causes of student withdrawal.

Through a mixed method approach this action research case study used online questionnaires to gather qualitative data from one hundred and one students, fourteen of these being withdrawn students and eighty seven being current students enrolled at the college. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten staff members including five members of curriculum staff, three members of the student support teams and two members of the Senior Management Team including the Principal. A focus group of nine current students was used to collect further qualitative data, this was analysed using the Constant Comparative Method discussed by Wellington (2000) as it allowed comparison between the different participants results. The quantitative data was sourced from retention statistics of all other colleges in the UK.

The findings were triangulated and highlighted a difference in opinion in that of student experiences and the opinions of staff. The national statistics showed that retention at the case study college is lower than that of similar colleges and that the socio-economic status of the college was not a significant factor. Staff suggested a range of factors that affect students most of which were external factors, whereas students, in particular withdrawn students highlighted issues that are internal and are within the college's control.

The ability to generalise the findings of the study beyond the case study itself is limited due to the sampling of only one case. Therefore the findings are relevant only to this college, although the withdrawn participants provide an opinion often misrepresented in previous studies. The study supports some of the conclusions drawn from previous literature in addition to highlighting areas of improvement for the college to develop further.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

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The study was carried out whilst I was teaching at a college of Further Education (FE) and was motivated to investigate the different reasons for student withdrawal. Retention was an issue that was discussed on a regular basis in both formal and informal meetings within the college. However, it was clear that while retention was an identified area of development within the college, there was a lack of understanding and data as to why students were leaving. This study was carried out to explore the factors that students and staff felt affected retention across “Olympic College” and how they felt the college could improve its rates of retention. Olympic College is the pseudonym chosen to represent the college researched; all the names of people and places used in the study are pseudonyms.

Olympic College has been continually graded a 3 in OFSTED inspections. This grade means that the college, according to OFSTED, now “requires improvement”. The college changed the management structure in September 2010 when a new Principal was appointed and many other posts were lost resulting in job losses. Olympic College has multiple curriculum teams and these teams are required to devise and manage their own retention strategies. However, the college does provide a cross-college retention strategy as a foundation.

Retention impacts the college's success and there are financial implications involved. Therefore, curriculum teams are under pressure to get the right student on the right course and to retain them until they successfully finish the course. The impact of poor retention has recently been experienced at the college with courses not having enough students to continue and related staff redundancies. There are a number of ways in which the college tries to support students and retain them; these are influenced by the different support teams in the college. The teams which have the biggest impact on the retention of learners would be the curriculum, support and administration teams although the technical services, marketing, services to business, learning centres and estates contribute to the overall learning experience. These are discussed in detail within chapter 3.

The original aim of the study was to cover retention across the entire college. However, it became apparent that this may have resulted in a comprehensive study of the college and the scope would have been too large. Instead, the study focused on level 3 courses only.

Furthermore, level 3 provision had been highlighted as a problem area in terms of retention by the OFSTED (2010) inspectors. "Success rates for students aged 16 to 18 declined in 2009/10 and are low at intermediate and advanced levels. The main cause of low success rates is low retention". (p.5)

## **1.1 Rationale for the Study**

Martinez and Munday (1998) summaries the different types of research in this area suggesting that many are carried out by funding and inspection agencies or by individual colleges and centres identifying strategies to improve retention. The literature reviewed in the next chapter highlights the recent emergence of studies investigating student retention and strategies to improve current systems; it refers to new funding specification as the motive. This literature along with some more up to date sources suggest that the most common reasons for student withdrawal are (1) internal factors (2) inadequate advice and guidance (3) poor teaching and learning (4) personal reasons (5) financial struggles and (6) a lack of motivation. Subsequently this study will examine what students and staff feel are the factors that affect student retention on level 3 programmes at Olympic College.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This case study has two research questions

1. What do staff feel are the factors affecting student retention on level three programmes at Olympic College?
2. What do current students and students that have withdrawn feel are the factors affecting student retention on level three programmes at Olympic College?

## **Chapter 2 Literature**

### **Review**

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Retention is an incredibly important factor within the education sector and is used to gauge the success of an institution; strategically improved retention shows quality improvement. The Gale Encyclopaedia (2012) defines retention within education explaining

Retaining a student is fundamental to the ability of an institution to carry out its mission. A high rate of attrition which is the opposite of retention is not only a fiscal problem for schools, but a symbolic failure of an institution to achieve its purpose. (p.1)

FE is aimed predominantly at post-16 students, an institution finances are bound to the success rates achieved. A college benefits financially from students staying on the course and achieving their qualification meaning retention is key to success. The Framework for Excellence (2012) shows how success is calculated using this example. Starters: 75, Completers: 60, divide the completers by the starters and multiply by 100, the Retention Rate = 80%. This does not mean that the completed students had been successful in achieving the qualification purely that they have stayed the duration of the course. To calculate the Achievement Rate the number of students Registered is used, in this case: 60, multiplied by the number of Achievers: 55, this would make

the Achievement Rate = 91.6%. The Success Rate would then be Retention Rate multiplied by the Achievement Rate = 73%. Staff aim to have the highest success rate possible to show the value of their course.

Financial implications are only part of the problem when a college has low retention rates. Brunsdon (2000) discusses how the implications fall into three streams, the institutional issues meaning low retention rates show a failure in a college's mission, wasting time, money and impacting its reputation. The second stream is the personal impact, lowering self confidence and increasing the chances of failing to progress into the more successful jobs due to a lack of qualification and self belief. Thirdly, society is impacted negatively having more people dependant on financial assistance, a lower contribution in taxes and less entrepreneurial spirit. Brunsdon highlights that these issues can lead on to impact parenting skills, likelihood of committing crimes and less competencies in the use of I.T.

FE is currently under government pressures to improve its quality for money and help skill young people to aid economical growth. The Government Skills Strategy requires institutions to meet Public Sector Agreement Targets, part of which is to meet Minimum Levels of Performance. These are success rates used as minimum targets to reach; if these are not met an institution is deemed as under achieving. The Skills for Sustainable Growth (2010) strategy document explains

...a strong further education and skills system is fundamental to social mobility, re-opening routes for people from wherever they begin to succeed in work, become confident through becoming accomplished and play a full part in civil society.

(p.3)

Student retention has always been an important factor in education and Tinto created a well-known model in 1975 which has been adapted and is still used today to show the influences. His conclusion was that retention is a mixture of academic and social integration, when a student enrolls into college they enrol into an academic system that is classified by intellectual development and performance, this forms the academic integration. At the same time they enter into a social system, interacting with peers and people within the chosen course, this forms social integration. Together Tinto's theory states that they influence institutional commitments and goals and inspire the student's choice to stay or leave. An example of this can be found in Appendix A. The theory has been expanded upon by Tinto and is still in development, he also cites Spady (1971) who makes a connection between dropping out of college and Durkheim's (1897) link to suicide. Durkheim suggested someone was more likely to commit suicide if they had failed to integrate into society and did not hold the same values as the system of society. This analogy compares itself to a student withdrawing after failing to integrate into the

academic system. Forbes (2008) adapted Tintos model to take into account later socio economic factors, such as a students need to work part time due to financial pressures. Hodgson, May and Marks-Maran (2008) conducted a study which found that peer support and social engagement were key factors in retaining students in the first year of a course.

## **2.1 Retention: What's the Big Issue?**

In the last decade the Further Education sector has seen an emergence of research leading to strategies that aim to address the issue of student retention. A common motivation behind the strategies is the application and evidencing of funding within local and national government. Institutions must apply for different types of funding as income for the college and once spent they must evidence the impact of that funding. Martinez (2001) suggests there is substantial literature investigating the subject of student retention although they are difficult to access in the public domain. Poor student retention has a significant impact on the institution's finances. Davies (1999) investigates the recent attention paid to retention and whether it is "...a problem of quality or student finance?" (p.1). This paper begins:

There have been increased pressures from the government and its agencies to demonstrate value for money in the use of public finance. Attention has therefore been drawn to the potential waste

represented by students who enrol on college courses, but who fail to complete them, and often leave without recording any measurable achievement in terms of recognised qualifications (p.1).

Research would suggest that FE has seen many changes recently and the failure of students has a negative impact on not only the institution but also a lasting effect on learners, teaching staff, managers and inspectors. The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (2012) discuss

The state of FE in colleges gives compelling evidence of the extent and speed of continual changes to funding, curriculum content and assessment systems. Colleges have also had to cope with changing political and educational goals, structural reorganisation and the expanding roles of an increasingly fragmented workforce. (p.10)

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme highlights the effects of these changes on teacher's roles, aims and practices. It shows the need for those who control funds, as well as inspectors, institutional managers and teachers themselves, to have a far better

understanding of the context in which teachers and learners have to work.

Mansell and Parkin, (1990) (as cited by McGivney 1996) report that managers have been encouraged to deal with the effects of poor retention and success instead of addressing the cause, "...sanctioning initial over enrolment, and instituting reviews of class sizes when dropout has taken its toll"( p.13).

McGivney (1996) explores the publishing of poor retention data and examines Kember's (1995) study which suggests that some institutions have procedures to avoid collecting poor retention data and others are encouraged to conceal information. "Some respondents to this enquiry admitted that there are temptations to camouflage them and that there is even, in some cases, an official policy not to record them" (p19) (as cited in McGivney1996). This is not a recent policy but highlights the historical practices. Misrepresentation of information can cause serious financial issues in later years for course funding. Other issues include positive withdrawal discussed by Herrick (1986): is dropping out of a course because employment has been sought something that colleges should be punished for? What if withdrawal still means positive progression in a person's development: should this still be collected as a failure on that institution? Transferring from one course to another has the same statistical implication as complete withdrawal. McGivney (1996)

quotes from the Further Education Funding Council Circular (1993)  
“...a student who transferred between programmes of study would  
count as a withdrawal from the first programme and an additional  
enrolment on the second” (p.22).

The methods and procedures for collecting data vary from one  
institution to another and is often not assigned to particular people or  
roles, some give this directly to tutors to record, others appointing  
student service personnel. It seems within some institutions staff are  
not sure whose responsibility it is. McGivney (1996) reports

The evidence provided by colleges suggests that  
the accuracy of the information collected and  
recorded relies heavily on the vigilance and energy  
of individual tutors, the correctness of entries in  
registers, and the prompt notification of staff by  
students that they are intending to withdraw or  
have withdrawn from a programme-all of which  
leaves a large margin for potential error. (p37)

The Further Education Funding Council (1995) (as cited by  
McGivney 1996) examined data collection procedures within their  
study and make similar observations concerning the lack of official  
data recording. They reported that data is recorded by tutors who are  
reluctant to say that a student has left due to poor quality teaching,

lack of support or anything else as this would leave responsibility with their staff team. Therefore having tutors provide the data may be a flawed and unreliable method.

Institutions are asked to consider whether their computer systems have the capacity to record and retrieve the relevant data as some software and systems are more rigorous than others. McGivney (1996) explains that “The Further Education Funding Council has established a more rigorous data, collection system and it is expected that analysis of Individualised Student Records ISR will eventually yield a comprehensive national profile of student attendance patterns.” (p.36)

An updated response to the Individualised Student Records system is discussed in the LSC Data Request Circular (2005) procedures were analysed and changes made once again to improve the system further. These changes were set by the Learning Skills Council and state that to improve the system they intend to

- change the categories and codes for ethnicity in line with those being used at the 2001 census
- collect student forenames in place of student initials
- change its confidentiality guidelines
- collect most recent programme start date

- collect enhanced guided learning hours. (LSC)

The process of analysing and amending the data collection system continues as part of the LSC's duty to secure the provision of educational facilities in England.

McGivney (1996) defines the different ways a student may fail or be deemed as withdrawn. A student may fail to attend until the course end date, they may enrol but never start the course, some may be withdrawn through a formal withdrawal procedure and others stop attending for a period of time which would have them removed from the course. A student may decide to leave that course and begin another course at the same institution or move to a different college to study but in all these circumstances, withdrawal would have a negative effect on the retention rates after the first six weeks of study. (p.21)

McGivney (1996) asks how institutions contact and advise learners who were missing from the course but not yet withdrawn. Some responses were that it was

(1) Tutorial responsibility, (2) Tutors are to follow attendance guidelines and (3) Students are contacted by letter, telephone and sometimes in person. (p.37) As these responses suggest, there is no single established procedure for contacting

withdrawn students. Most commonly it appears to be left to the teaching staff... (p.37)

As discussed the Further Education Development Council is driving FE institutions to consider the aspect of non-completion and says it is establishing a new data collection system to create Individualised Support Records. This is to build a detailed, national profile of student attendance patterns that colleges can then effectively act on.

According to Martinez (2001) there is a lack of research in colleges compared to schools which could be responsible for the lack of literature focussing on student retention. Unfortunately Martinez also identifies that a lot of research is not available in the public domain so this may not still be the case however it is difficult to measure. The Learning Skills Development Agency supports the point in their publication analysing retention and achievement. They discuss how the Department for Education and Skills, The Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Executive carry out the majority of research in the skills sector. The literature currently available is of two kinds. Martinez (2001) suggests it is either “research that investigates the perceived problems of drop out or failure to achieve qualification” or it is “research that identifies possible solutions how providers can improve or raise retention and achievement rates.” (p.1) These are the most common research questions asked.

1. What are the causes for student withdrawal and which of these do institutions have control over?
2. What makes the difference in whether a student completes or withdraws?
3. What areas in college should be prioritised for improvements? (p.1)

Older literature including the HM Inspectorate (1991) concludes that most withdrawal is down to external factors but the more recent research concludes otherwise: so what does previous retention literature say are the common reasons for withdrawal?

## **2.2 Common Reasons for Withdrawal**

Student retention has been the topic of research studies from the 1970's, in the last 40 years a range of different theories and models have identified different focuses and conclusions. Kuh (2004) highlights that the 1970's had a focus on the first year of college and providing extra curricular activities to provide a wider experience for learner's. The 1980's focussed on studying the backgrounds of the students and identifying the external social factors. This changed in the 1990's to highlight that factors are not purely external and so institutions need to look at internal factors. Moving into the twenty first century a range of models now highlight the internal and external

issues. These focus on psychological, sociological and economical issues as well as the service provided by an institution. Some of the most common areas at the root of student withdrawal are outlined below

1. Inadequate or no information, advice and guidance
2. Ineffective Inductions
3. Lack of, late or weak diagnostics
4. Poor curriculum design
5. Poor teaching and learning
6. Inadequate support
7. Personal reasons
8. Financial struggles
9. Lack of motivation

In the 1991 Her Majesties Inspectorate Report by DES, data shows that personal reasons, finances and a significant change in family circumstance were responsible for 80% of withdrawals. Some 10% of withdrawals gave no reason and 10% blamed the quality of the course and the learners own performance (DES, 1991).

Dearing (1996) and Callendar (1999) report very different results where finance is concerned here. Callendar's study highlights that 70% of withdrawn students had financial hardship with course fees and under a quarter of students had considered leaving early. Over one third of students also reported a decline in performance due to financial hardship. This is a contrast in relation to Dearing (1996) who

states that there is little evidence to suggest that financial issues affect rates. He concludes a lack of motivation is a major factor and excessive workload causing long hours of studying. The Wirral Metropolitan College (1994) researched the reasons for withdrawal and concluded that those in financial difficulty were twice as likely to drop out.

In studies of withdrawn and current students, research suggests that personal problems, financial hardship and employment conflicts were not any higher in those of current students compared to withdrawn. There were also higher rates of issues related to the student's expectations, and withdrawn students said they would not encourage anybody else to go on the course. 59% of students that gave a low rating for how helpful and supportive teachers were later withdrew (Dearing, 1996).

Davies (1999) explores the views of withdrawn students: he concludes that they showed a negative opinion on the quality of the teaching and the support given to them. Some suggested that teachers were not organised and they failed to give them help and advice with work. They did not feel they were getting help in becoming qualified and did not like the timing of the classes. They also reported struggling to settle in and having a poor experience of the enrolment process.

There are some similarities in data looking at pre-enrolment expectations. Borrow (1996) (cited by Martinez, 2001), for example, discusses the negative impact that change has on students success. Students identified that there were changes to the programme that they had signed up to. This may be a simple change in the subject units delivered, Keyskills or Functional Skills being included without notification or changes in location. This opinion was also discussed by Swain (2012) in which she discusses the importance of students having accurate expectations of the course. Another issue identified by the Local Education Authority report was that students had expressed concerns in the liaison within the teaching team.

The Responsive College Unit (1998) said that some other weaknesses were in the induction programmes: some programmes did not have an induction at all; others had induction time but did not fill it efficiently. An induction is to help students get to know one another, introduce them to the course and prepare them for the forthcoming challenge. Swain (2012) suggests that some students are not aware of the new terminology found on their course and so an induction is important to introduce them to the new surroundings. Within induction tutors often identify the learning style of the students which can be an important foundation for the rest of the course. Askham Bryan College specialises in the practical-based subjects of horticulture and farming. The college identified issues in which tutors used a theoretical teaching approach despite having a large proportion of activist and

hands-on learners. This could result in students struggling from the beginning of the course.

The Further Education Development Agency held the largest known study of student retention with a sample of 9000 participants. Class was used as a bias for the study because a lot of the students came from areas of deprivation. Within this study the students had a lot to say about their experiences of teaching and learning. Teaching should aim to be relevant, stimulating, challenging and have some variety. Martinez and Munday (1998) reported that more evaluations of student experience should be collected but more importantly acted upon. Some responses collected were:

1. "Some of our classes are boring";
2. "The teacher reads from pamphlets and handouts without explaining, I can't understand";
3. "The group is too big and the range of ability is too wide, whether you sink or swim is up to you";
4. "We need more activities and trips so we can see what's going on";
5. "Tutors don't give work back for ages so we don't know how we are getting on". (p.90)

Martinez explains that when students are not stimulated by their subjects this can lead to a drop in motivation and a lack of understanding if information is not being retained. If this is left over a period of time we see students getting a backlog of assignments and then struggling to cope with the workload rather than the difficulty of the work.

Problems in coping with the volume of assessments rather than the level of difficulty are common as students find it hard to cope with heavy workloads when too many assessments are required at once or personal circumstances make it difficult to fulfil requirements at particular times (p.91)

Drapers (2012) study of student drop out supports Martinez's views in that the way a student has been taught at school can have a dramatic effect on their success early on in a course. If this is vastly different students may struggle with the work and consequently drop out early.

Martinez and Munday (1998) also go on to explain how workload affects retention stating that students can drop out when they fall behind with work and find giving up easier than catching up.

“Assignments are not planned by tutors-they don't talk to each other we can get several together-there is too much pressure- we have eight to finish in three weeks” (p.92)

Kenwright (1996) draws attention to poor timetabling of classes and the impact this can have on attendance. If students are due in solely for one class or have gaps between one class and another they are often less likely to attend. Financially, poor timetabling can also be difficult when paying for public transport.

Could the recent liberal entry policy be having a negative effect on retention results? A level courses now offer a lot of academic and personal support for “non-traditional applicants” who often cannot cope with the challenge of the course. However, the positive effect of this is more students having access to the qualifications ensuring diversity and equality overall. Non-traditional applicants may include international students who may not have English as their first language or students with additional learning needs who may have previously had a lot of support to complete previous qualifications. Bourner et al. (1991) says that many regard the high dropout rate as a price worth paying to have open access policies. This raises the previous question, when do we consider positive withdrawal, should giving more people the opportunity factor somewhere in the statistics?

The same question of the preparation of students is asked across the sector, particularly with the pressure on staff to recruit target numbers: do they prioritise quantity or quality of students and risk redundancies if courses are unsuccessful? Do they enrol students who require more support even though they pose a risk to data to give

some a chance and is there a reliable relationship between the grades gained at GCSE compared to the ability expected at college? The Guardian (2012) website details information in a recent report from the Exam Regulator Ofqual that "GCSE and A-level exams have become easier over the past few years, a review has found, prompting the government to warn of a gradual decline in standards" A spokesman also commented on behalf of the Department for Education that "These reports show that in recent years not enough has been demanded of students, and that they are not being asked to demonstrate real depth and breadth of knowledge". Although this has not been proven conclusively it is a common opinion in Further Education that levels of literacy and numeracy have dropped and often a student's ability is lower than their grades would suggest.

The Martinez and Munday study (1998) summarises previous studies and concludes students have more risk of leaving early if they are placed on the wrong course, this could be down to poor information, advice and guidance from the college or the advisors used prior to contacting the college. If courses are changed in the first few weeks or do not suit their ability students may find that what they receive from the course is different from their expectations and withdraw early. If students feel the marketing and recruiting of courses makes them appear more interesting and hands-on than in reality this can have a negative impact on their decision to stay or leave. Organisations must be sure to give accurate information so as to not create unrealistic

expectations. The content may be interesting but a curriculum that lacks variety and stimulation can create barriers to learning.

Students that apply late often struggle to catch up academically but also struggle to fit in socially. Tinto (1975) discusses the importance of social integration and that students need to feel adjusted socially and academically to feel comfortable in a new learning environment.

Starting later may miss introductory sessions around the course structure, time management, planning, study skills and research.

These are important skills to help within the course and the bonding of friendships can happen early on, leaving late comers struggling to settle in comfortably. The whole college experience has a huge impact on how enjoyable a course is and if students find it difficult in class to work in teams and talk to other students this can impact on their success. Students can also feel very lonely during breaks, lunchtimes and travelling to and from college without a social group to be part of.

Students within the Martinez and Munday (1998) study identified poor quality of teaching as having a negative impact on retention.

Positive relationships between tutors and students create an encouraging environment for learning, it's important that students feel that the tutor has the subject specialist knowledge, the skills of delivery and feel confident in their ability to be able to perform to their full potential.

Others felt that they didn't get the help planning university or career guidance. Support is needed to feel that there is a route of progression from one course to another or from education to employment; this may be Universities Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) support, open day's events and general guidance from the teaching team.

This same research suggests that male students are more likely to withdraw without completion than females. This research is also supported by Bidgood, Saebi and May (2006) who also state males are more likely to quit a course prematurely. Mature students also have a lower retention rate than those aged 16-18 years old, the reasoning given is that they have more financial issues, problems in relationships, and may spend more time looking after families.

Younger students in poor family circumstances often feel the strain of issues in the home and do not feel supported in their studies. Students who have fees waived or reduced are also more likely to leave prematurely, the cost of paying for a course can often be the incentive to finish it, having fees waived can remove the importance and responsibility.

Martinez and Munday (1998) also go on to identify that none of the reasons are in isolation and are complex issues in which more than one issue makes students weigh up the cost of staying or leaving. The key influences in the study were not those recorded officially by the

institutions, which makes one question the efficiency of recording data. Highlighted from the study was the issue that factors affecting student retention were things in the control of the colleges rather than external factors.

The report provides substantial evidence to challenge some widely held beliefs that

1. Dropout is largely caused by the personal circumstances of students
2. Initial student expectations of college are good predictors of persistence or drop out
3. Early withdrawal is strongly linked to the quality of college facilities or equipment
4. Students leave college to take up employment opportunities (p.8)

The issues identified by withdrawn students were the same as those described by current students, however something made the current students stay on the course. Institutions try to provide a network of support for students and this has been acknowledged by the students in the study. Evidence showed higher dropout rates when financial issues or personal problems coincide with poor quality of teaching. However, the satisfied current students identified that the support mechanisms within the colleges helped when they were faced with external problems. They also confirmed that personal circumstance

and finances were linked to non-completion rates but no more than course related issues.

Some issues encountered in the study can be found in the pre-enrolment process and the desired outcomes are often very different to the actual conflicts, see below (**Table 1**).

**Table 1. Desired Outcomes and Conflicts**

<b><u>Desired Outcome</u></b>	<b><u>Conflict</u></b>
Commitment to open success	Poor student outcomes
Strict entry criteria	Pressures to put bums on seats
Desire to maintain contact with students following application or other initial enquiry or application	Resource constraints
Impartial information and advice	Need to recruit students to a particular course
Teacher management of pre-enrolment processes	Centralised and standardised advice and guidance services
Creation of universal student entitlement	Creation of differential entitlement by mode of attendance or type of student
Specialisation of functions and systems creating a complex student pathway	Creation of transparent and simple pathway
Monitoring and evaluation of pre-enrolment services	Difficulties around systematic information gathering and monitoring

The conflicts discussed at pre-enrolment may be the first opportunity to identify factors that will impact students negatively. Curriculum design also has a heavy impact upon students and both staff and students mention areas that they identify as needing improvement. Induction is the first area in the Martinez and Munday (1998) study as students reported that induction took too long. They felt that trips out to places linked with employment in their industry would be more beneficial. Students also requested this time be used for study skills and time management preparation. It is common practice within the induction to cover the codes of conduct. This can be vital to ensure that students know what is expected of them. However, there can be an issue with regard to how the tutor gives this information. The Creative Education Blog (2012) explains that the method of delivery is important in keeping students interested. A lack of differentiation in delivery can alienate students and bore them. The historical style of standing at the front and talking for most of the lesson is no longer acceptable and can be a barrier for a person's learning. "Instead of an imparter of knowledge the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning." (The Creative Education Blog 12<sup>th</sup> May 2012)

Students have identified that there are limited modes of study as well as styles of delivery. Some study options may be more flexible learning, distance learning, e-learning; anything that suits the individual student needs. Some colleges offer mature learners courses with less contact time, these modes may provide an alternative to full

time study. However, other students have identified that fragmented attendance and distance learning has inhibited the building of relationships with peers. Martinez and Munday (1998) conclude that the results of withdrawal based on the mode of study was significant from one college to another and that this would be more pronounced at college level compared to national level. Within the different learning styles tutors are asked to prepare material for kinaesthetic, auditory, visual and tactile learners, however, the delivery of qualifications do not always allow for enough practical work. Students reported that often the amount of theoretical written work was too much and more practical activity was being sought. (Martinez & Munday 1998). Evidence requirements from awarding bodies may ask for assessments that do not support such activities and time restraints in the classroom can mean that the first time a student is doing an activity they are being assessed. The structure of assessments are mentioned particularly where assessments are overlapped causing the heavy workloads mentioned previously but also the language used can be too complex for students. Other responses to the Martinez and Munday (1998) study described students as having poor independent learning skills. For the different modes of studying to work staff must feel confident that students can learn independently and be motivated to work without staff guidance. The Creative Education Blog is an online teacher's forum which highlights the latest educational issues, discussions and resources. It discusses how independent learning benefits students and what the

role of a teacher is. Students need to feel confident in their ability to carry out tasks independently, “essentially by promoting independent learning we are encouraging and enabling our students to become self-directed in their learning experience and to have more autonomy and control over their learning.” (The Creative Education blog 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012)

Within the delivery of the course students in the Martinez and Munday study had expressed a lack of being able to track their own progress and achievements. This is useful in identifying upcoming tasks, deadlines, receiving gratification, seeing their achievements and is part of the independent learning process. Bidgood, May and Saebi (2006) discuss the range of internal and external factors affecting student retention and how this differs from one student to another they conclude that the complexity cannot be directed to one source. They go on to investigate 5 factors: gender, sex, ethnicity, age and whether an ESOL qualification is being studied. They suggest that along with ethnicity and gender, social background and age may contribute heavily to low retention rates.

Overall we can see an array of factors that contribute to student withdrawal; however, it is clear that this previous literature concludes that it is a culmination of factors rather than one main reason.

### **2.3 Withdrawn and Current Student Differences**

Davies (1999) found similar conclusions to Munday and Martinez (1998) showing the difference in results between current and

withdrawn students. Firstly both studies found that the decision to complete was not influenced by demographic factors but the students' attitude to their experience. Students that had applied early were more likely to stay and complete the course whereas students who applied late were more likely to withdraw. There was a prominent difference in evaluations of experiences, these included the quality of teaching, how interesting the course was, and how happy they were with their given timetables. Students who lived further away and so travelled further were also likely to leave prematurely. This was also found to be the case for students struggling with personal circumstances. There were differences in former expectations of the courses however these were not a good indication of probability of completion. Financial issues were not a major factor in younger students although it was in mature learners.

Davies (1999) concludes that current students do not have a hugely different profile to that of withdrawn students. Historically studies have used the free school meals data to identify students in financial hardship. However, this is not possible in college. The closest data would have been that of the Education Maintenance Allowance or Adult Learning Grant however this has been recently withdrawn. This along with the lack of data means it is difficult to show a relationship between deprivation and retention. Davies goes on to say

Although financial difficulties are a common trigger of student drop-out, in general withdrawal appears to result only in cases where students have doubts that they are on the right course, are concerned about the quality of the teaching and are unhappy with the support they are receiving for progression. Where students are fully satisfied in these areas they appear to be prepared to ride out the financial problem and to stay on the course successfully. Indeed, they often perceive the college as a key support mechanism in their ability to do so, and become powerful advocates for further education as a consequence. (p.8)

Other identifying factors include the motivation of students prior to enrolling; both current and withdrawn students show the same pre-course expectations. Withdrawn students offer more than one reason for them leaving showing that it is generally an accumulation of factors. The factors collected from withdrawn participants were mainly internal factors within the control of the colleges. Medway and Penny (1994) explain that “factors affecting non completion were the same factors which lead to unsuccessful completion. Half of unsuccessful completers would have left before completion if an acceptable alternative opportunity had arisen”.(p.36) Rephrased this

means that even students that have stayed on the course until the official end date but were then unsuccessful in completing the qualification showed the same responses as those that left early.

Medway and Penny (1994) (cited by Martinez 2001) state there was a big differences between staff views and student views. Teaching and learning issues have been called “boring” “uninspiring” and “poorly constructed” (p.4).

Martinez (2001) suggests a range of other literature which also supports his findings. Lamping and Ball (1996) found that poor quality teaching and group dynamics were both reported by withdrawn students. Many other authors (Borrow, 1996; Kenwright, 1996; Lea, 2000) report that “poor course organisation in terms of changes to the advertised programme, timetable, rooming or staff, and inadequate liaison within the teaching team. Hall and Marsh (1998) and Wardman and Stevens (1998) suggest the scheduling of assessments was poor or excessive. Finally, Askham Bryan College (2000) and Blaire and Woodhouse (2000) (cited by Martinez (2001) report a mismatch between activist and hands on learning styles to the theoretical approaches from staff (p.4). Cook (2012) conducted a more recent project which supports the idea of internal factors being the most common to impact student retention, he states that the course is main the problem. In particular the design of a course is often carried out by people who have not experienced the different methods schools are using to teach today.

## **2.4 Suggestions for Improvements**

Institutions have diverse methods of improving retention which are common throughout the literature. Suggestions include ways of early follow up for absenteeism and a clear strategy as to who does this. This is to ensure students know that staff have noticed they are missing, able to provide support if need be or begin the disciplinary process. Martinez (1998) suggests “prompt telephone follow up of absence” (p.118) and one to one interviews with students who have poor attendance to investigate the issue further. Quick reactions to these issues early on can influence better attendance in other students.

Other strategies include making improvements to course induction, introducing mentoring teams, improving tutorial support and tying in subject specific activities. It is also beneficial to act on the feedback given by students for example, by changing the length or content of the course induction and introducing offsite industry trips.

Swain (2012) and Bouner and Barlow (1991) conclude that well planned inductions provide a better experience of education and reflect low absenteeism and withdrawal later in the course. Tinto’s (1975) theory of social integration suggests that this settling in period is vital in building the inter-student and inter-staff relationships needed to fit into the college effectively.

Martinez (1998) discusses the three types of successful strategies required to improve retention. The curriculum strategy focuses on open flexible learning, initial assessments, tutoring, curriculum audits, induction, motivation and reviews. The support strategies centre on finance, child care, transport along with information advice and guidance. The managerial strategy oversees the first two strategies. He goes on to suggest that financial issues would have less impact on student retention than improving academic quality. Finances do impact but only in cases where students already have reservations about the course and if it is right for them. If not they will ride out the financial difficulty and complete their studies. Davies (1999) highlights that

at the level of national policy, decision-makers should take care not to ignore issues connected with student finance, and to assume that retention is solely a matter to be tackled within the responsibilities of colleges. As we have seen, there is evidence that carefully targeted financial assistance would have a positive impact - especially on poorer adult students with childcare responsibilities. (p.9)

A reliable and accurate way of recording withdrawal and reasons must be sought to show trustworthy data to work from. Evaluations need to

be completed by students in a manner that does not create uneasiness if they comment on something related to tutor performance or academic quality. Institutions should pay close attention to student evaluations and following up those that are low on quality of teaching. This may cause distress for lecturers during individual performance reviews but would provide quality assurance for the college. Martinez and Munday (1998) confirm that it is important that students have effective channels for expressing their views and that they are listened and responded to the information then needs analysing. “The quality manager analyses the survey results and issues a report to inform the college of issues for concern and possible action”. (p.128)

One strategy would be to study and learn from courses that have high quality student evaluations and high retention rates. This would provide opportunities to share good practice with weaker areas. Martinez and Munday (1998) highlight additional strategies for retention including extending the advice and guidance provision, ensuring that students are recruited with integrity; accepting the right students on the courses rather than prioritising numbers.

Tutors and curriculum leaders are advised by Martinez and Munday to pay more attention to the early stages of college life, observing group dynamics and group ethos and intervening early on. Staff should establish a close relationship with students to create the supportive environment. Building close relationships within one to one tutorials

and subject tutors within classes will help identify underperforming students or students who are at risk. Other strategies include the tracking of achievements and following up students who are dropping behind. Martinez and Munday (1998) discuss the use of at risk profiling to indicate the degree of risk each student is of withdrawal. “Risk factors include a lack of progress goals, lack of support at home or working part-time.” Following up the development of students once support has been allocated is important to evaluate the effectiveness of such support.(p.121) Martinez (2001) discuss creating more methods of motivation including the involvement of parents, setting targets and detailed feedback within assessments.

Improvements to teaching are also suggested but this is a vague statement although a comprehensive element. They emphasise prioritising students and asking teaching teams to be self-critical and evaluate their effectiveness honestly. Managers are advised to also look at the development of the curriculum framework and to look at the college weeks and year. This should enable teaching and the promotion of independent learning to be balanced. They are also requested to provide proactive leadership which focuses on student success but also aims to motivate its staff. Staff will become motivated if they feel they are appreciated and can see an investment and a commitment to professional development. An increase in case studies and action research within institutions is encouraged. This could be tied into staffs' professional development; this may also support the reliable collecting of data. The last area for management

to focus on is the quality assurance systems and how staff use them. A system is only as effective as the person using it and Cousins (2001) (as cited by Martinez, 2001) examines this "...well developed and mature management information and quality assurance systems which command the respect of their users". (p.6) Martinez concludes "The strategies reviewed here provide compelling evidence that student persistence and drop out are significantly influenced by the experience of study and learning and that colleges and adult education can improve retention rates"(p.6)

Similar conclusions and suggestions can be found throughout the previous literature in this area however there is minimal literature that tests the strategies put in place. Martinez (2000) discusses strategies of intervention which can seem domineering and come from the top down. These must be designed with management and curriculum staff and be monitored for effectiveness allowing a channel for feedback. "Strategies can be top down, bottom up or shared....the way that strategies to raise achievement are inspired, researched, designed, implemented and evaluated varies considerably from college to college and even within the same college".(p.90)

Tyssen (2012) explains how motivation can be used to improve a student's attitude to the course they are on. Intrinsic motivation being personal and from within an individual in comparison to extrinsic influences which is being influenced by reward or punishment affect students differently. Tyssen's research suggests that as students

become more intrinsically motivated within the second year of a course they become more satisfied with the service they receive. This theory is supported by Hill (2012) who suggests that students with lower personal motives and higher external influences are less satisfied with the courses they studied.

In summary the literature reviewed highlights the importance of retention rates to an institution and the different implications of having low retention. The financial implications are seen to be the most significant but the waste of resources and impact on an individual's confidence are also highlighted throughout. A selection of the literature is more than ten years old however these studies use large samples and so have detailed findings and suggestions for improvements. The most common factors suggested by both the older and more recent literature are internal and related to the course design, teaching and learning, enrolment, motivation and lack of support. The external issues identified are related to finance, personal issues, students leaving to find employment and the complexity of a range of factors coming together. Suggested strategies for preventing low retention rates include utilising flexible approaches, differentiated learning styles, monitoring absenteeism, collecting student feedback and recording detailed retention data. The research to follow aims to investigate the factors effecting students at Olympic College. This study will use a mixed method approach to investigate the opinions and experiences of staff and students. The study will use opinions of

current students enrolled on courses and that of withdrawn students.

The methodology aims to keep a structure to the collection of data but allow for open honest responses that can be analysed and used effectively. The following chapter will discuss the methodology used, the sample of participants and analysis of the data.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

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In response to the research questions I decided to use a participation action research approach with Olympic College as a single case study.

As the researcher and practitioner within the college it is important to draw attention to the limits of having both roles. The British

Educational Research Association (2004) state that

Researchers engaged in action research must consider the extent to which their own reflective research impinges on others, for example in the case of the dual role of teacher and researcher and the impact on students and colleagues. Dual roles may also introduce explicit tension in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly.

(p 6-7)

Ethical issues and confidentiality are discussed in later chapters along with the chosen participants in chapter 3 p.63.

A mixed method approach was used to ensure that if one method neglected one aspect another method would highlight it; it would also reduce potential bias found in one method ensuring it is not imitated elsewhere. Creswell, (2005) (as cited in Freankel and Wallen, 2006) explores the different mixed method designs and explains that

increased attention is being given to these methods. Creswell discusses the strengths of a triangulation design in collecting data simultaneously compared to the explanatory design which begins with quantitative data and later uses qualitative to provide reasoning for the original quantitative results. The exploratory design encourages researchers to first collate qualitative data and use quantitative data to validate the results. The majority of this research is of a qualitative nature looking at staff and students experiences and opinions. This is common within social sciences as the research is based around human behaviour and reasoning for such behaviours. The study will be that of a triangulated design collecting all data simultaneously to compare and contrast at the data analysis stage. This approach will be using semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and a focus group; this predominantly qualitative approach will give reasoning for behaviours and attitudes. Allen, Black, Clarke and Fulop (2001) discuss the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research by stating that “Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials- case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional and visual texts.” (p.1). These methods are discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

Quantitative data was also collected within the questionnaires along with the national statistics used to identify retention rates in relation to similar colleges nationally. Allen, Black, Clarke and Fulop (2001)

suggest that quantitative data is often less labour intensive than qualitative and it gives scope for larger samples of participants. One advantage discussed is that within quantitative research, data collection can be delegated saving the researcher time in comparison to qualitative methods which often require hands on involvement.

Within this mixed method approach the qualitative methods are used in a dominant status rather than an equivalent, as there is more data identifying peoples' opinions, experiences and behaviours than there is numbers and statistics. The descriptive quantitative data regarding retention levels at other colleges is minimal in comparison to the student questionnaire which provides open questions for explanations of behaviour. The staff interviews rely solely on experiential information along with the analysis of the current retention strategies being used at the college. Denscombe (2007) explains the disadvantages of the mixed method approach. He suggests that the cost and time of using a range of methods can become a hindrance and the researcher must also build skills in carrying out the variety of methods to enhance the efficiency of each piece.

As I am carrying out the research whilst being a practitioner and have no set idea as to what may be highlighted the other theory being utilised here is Grounded Theory. Denscombe (2007) concludes that when using a grounded theory approach I should begin the investigation with an open mind, avoid rigid ideas and "embark on a

voyage of discovery” (p.90) The idea is that this study will have impact in the college, this means that rather than practicing purely for the sake of theoretical research these conclusions are aimed to work well in practice and help identify issues that the college can then base future strategies around. This type of grounded theory is built upon the foundations of Glaser and Strauss (1967) theory of pragmatism. This focuses on theory being used in a practical sense. It discusses how to test the value of a theory it is best tested in a real situation.

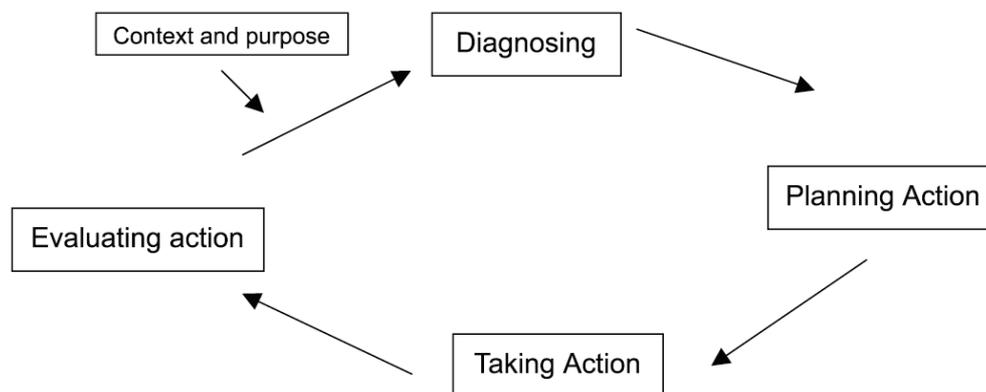
Currently the college has a range of departments that work together to improve the learning experience; this is done using a range of strategies. The first strategy used is Initial Advice and Guidance, this is given through the Student Services team and here students receive guidance whilst choosing a course of study. At this stage of a learner’s journey it is important to show what the whole college has to offer, what is suitable for the individual and provide the expectations that a student will start their course with. Curriculum teams then have the responsibility to deliver interesting and inspiring lessons and monitor success through regular and varied assessments. Tutors are asked to use a range of technologies, stretch and challenge students to reach their full potential and prepare them for the chosen route of progression. The Additional Learning Support team support students with additional learning needs after assessments in the first academic term. This ensures equality and diversity throughout the college and ensures that learning needs do not become a barrier to student success.

Student Services also provide Student Liaison Officers to support students with pastoral issues and enrichment opportunities. The Curriculum Learning Centre's provide support through the Learning Centre Team offering study support and a range of resources to compliment the chosen academic course.

There are a number of additional support teams including IT Technical Support, Design and Print, Marketing and others but these teams have less direct influence on student's retention although all the support services provide invaluable services.

It is apparent in my own experience that these teams are all motivated to provide a high level of support and service to the students.

**Diagram 1. Action Research Cycle**



(p.131)

The diagram above (**Diagram 1**) shows Rowley's (2003) action research cycle, this study will focus on diagnosing issues. To then design the solutions, implement them and evaluate the success would be too big a job for this investigation and within the time frame given,

although it may be implemented and evaluated as part of another study or continued at a later date. The problem has been identified in the college Self Assessment Report 2009/2010 and in the OFSTED (2010) report as well as in college meetings with the Principal. The study will aim to look deeper into the problem of retention and identify the aspects causing the problem.

Before deciding upon this method of researching other ways were explored including single subject research. It would have been possible to carry out a study on a group of students over a one or two year period to look at the retention issues that came up. This, however, would not demonstrate a diverse range of issues on other courses or personal issues that may not crop up in that group of individuals so would not provide eclectic data. Other methods such as experimental, ethnographic or comparative research would not be appropriate in the case of experimental design or feasible in terms of time for an ethnographic approach. A comparative approach was considered. However, access to the neighbouring FE college was not possible. Correlation research would be possible within this study as it would be interesting to see how retention rates correlate with the staff who use current retention procedures however the study needs to find out who uses the procedures and how well they are used to first have this information. If this data was already available it would have been valuable to look for a correlation. Within the action research approach it may be necessary to use historical research and look at how

retention rates have changed over the years, speak to staff that were around at that time and discuss what strategies worked well. In comparison to the other methods action research has many advantages. Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) discuss these in depth along with the similarities between action research and formal quantitative and qualitative research. They express that it is a method that any professional can use, in any school or college and to investigate any problem. It supports the development of educational practice and has a place in improving services delivered. In doing action research it is possible to create a community of “research orientated individuals”. (p.574) The reasoning for the action research approach was personal, as being a practitioner at the college it allowed participation in the improvement and development of the college and its practices.

### **3.1 Selection of Participants**

Firstly the national statistics were collected to compare the college’s retention rates with similar colleges nationally. Staff were selected systematically to include staff from areas of higher than average retention, areas with an average retention and some poor retention areas. The sector subject with the highest student retention according to the Data Service 2010 recorded 94.2%, the lowest area had 43% and a subject sector in the middle recorded 71.4%. Staff members from different levels of these curriculum teams were selected as interviewees to provide a range of perspectives. Added to these were

members of senior management and support staff to total 11 staff interviews. The support staff were selected from the Student Services and Safeguarding Team. To collect a variety of perspectives I then created questionnaires to be completed by current students and another aimed at as many withdrawn students as possible. A focus group of nine students was also used to give an opportunity for discussion and reasoning. The student groups selected were from the areas highlighted in the staffing sample this was in anticipation that they may have had different experiences within these areas. The withdrawn students were selected randomly from the withdrawn students list provided by the information system at the college and spanned across all departments as there was an expectation that the response rate would be low. All students within both current and withdrawn samples were over 16 years of age and were studying level 3 programmes at the college. It was originally hoped that the withdrawn student list would provide reasons for withdrawal and this was going to be used to systematically sample however the data failed to have any reasoning. The gender and age of the students can be seen below (**Table 2**).

**Table 2**

**Age and gender of participating students both current and withdrawn**

<b>Gender of Current students</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Male	79.5%	62
Female	20.5%	16

<b>Age of Current students</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
16-18	53.8%	42
19-25	35.9%	28
26+	10.3%	8
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>78</b>

<b>Gender of Withdrawn students</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Male	50.0%	7
Female	50.0%	7
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>14</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>0</b>

<b>Age of Withdrawn students</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percentage</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
16-18	38.5%	5
19-25	30.8%	4
26+	30.8%	4
<i>answered question</i>		<b>13</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>1</b>

### **3.2 The Context of Olympic College**

Within this chapter all buildings and place names have been replaced with pseudonyms, Olympic College has been chosen to represent the name of the college in which the study was based. Olympic College is based in the centre of Maxton in Yorkshire and is the only large general Further Education college in Maxton. Other colleges in this town are The St James College, which is a Sixth Form specialising mainly in ‘A’ level programmes. Denton College is a small Further and Higher Education college based locally and has a much smaller provision.

Olympic College in 2010 had 2,250 fulltime learners aged 16-18 years old and 347 part time learners, there is also a School Link provision for learners aged 14-16 and this currently has 455 enrolments. The college has a large provision of foundation learners

currently totalling 1,526 on the full-time programmes and 1,789 on the part time. The provision for adults aged over 19 years is much larger on the part time course than the full time, currently there are only 779 full time learners and 5,859 part time learners enrolled. The college's employment provision which includes apprenticeships and Train to Gain has 1644 enrolments giving the college an overall total of 14,685 learners.

The college operates across two campuses, the Town Centre Campus comprises of four buildings, The Oldfield Building, The Allen Building, The Booth Building and a newly built Henderson Building costing £8 million. The Wharton Campus is situated in Jackson approximately 8 miles away from the Town Centre Campus. This was once a separate college but the two were merged in 2004. Across both campuses the college provides a wide range of vocational qualifications in new recently structured departments

1. Business, Computing and Education
2. Caring Professions, Science and Land- based Industries
3. Creative Service Industries
4. Construction
5. Mechanical and Electrical Engineering
6. Preparation for Life and Work
7. Visual and Performing Arts

In September 2010 the college had a change in principal. The Principal had previously been a Vice-Principal at an institute of

Further and Higher Education; Emily Allen has worked in Further Education for 25 years before taking on the role of Principal and was also employed at other colleges in Yorkshire. Emily Allen has lead a variety of changes at Olympic College since September including a staff restructure which was the result of government funding cuts and a new £8 million Henderson Building at the Town Centre Campus.

“...We’ve restructured as a result, with a view to being more streamlined, flexible and responsive. The Principle expresses through the college marketing strategies that “The new Henderson Building at our Town Centre Campus is a really exciting development for the college and illustrates our ambitions for the future.” Emily Allen, Principal.

As an existing member of staff I have experienced this restructure, seen colleagues leave, changes in roles and new team members join the college. The college explained that they were preparing to see a 5% decrease in retention during the restructure as this is common particularly where staff roles become redundant and students feel the impact of change however the data shows a small increase. The college is currently in a time of change and the emphasis has been placed on creating a new culture at Olympic College and encouraging both staff and students at the college to embrace the change and work together to create this new culture together. The Principal encourages people in the latest marketing material to join the college in its recent changes.

“This is a great time to come and study with us, with our student success rates reaching their highest ever levels and significant investment in the college facilities” Emily Allen, Principal

The following statistics used have been taken from the National Census in 2001. The majority of students studying at Olympic College are categorized as being white and currently reside in the borough of Maxton. Maxton’s population of people from a white background makes up 95.9% of its 248,175 total. Ethnic minority groups make up 4.1% of these with 2.2% being from an Asian background. The largest group of students from an ethnic minority background at Olympic College come from an a Asian British and Pakistani background and most of these learners study at the Town Centre Campus, which is closer to the ethnic minority communities of Maxton. The percentage of females studying at the college is slightly higher to that of the males at 54% but this is somewhat consistent with the population of males to females in the Maxton borough which is 51.3%. The college has a lot of students who claim Education Maintenance Allowance as a means of financial support. An interesting piece of data is the qualification attainment for young people and adults as this is below the national average. Forty nine percent of the population are students, although 36.8% of the population have no qualifications at all Thirty nine percent of people are unemployed and 7.9% are disabled or on long term sick. Maxton

is currently classed as an area of deprivation and was ranked in the top 60 out of 326 most deprived areas in England.

Maxton Metropolitan Borough Council collect independent data relating to benefits and claimants and these were last updated in 2007. They record that 24.7% of the people in Maxton claim council related benefits and 17.7% of children are entitled to free schools meals as their parents are in the low income bracket. The attainment of GCSE's grade A-C is below national average at 54%, this information provides a useful base for the research to be carried out. It is useful to put Maxton into context, to understand the economical and social circumstance in which the college is based. It is important to identify the possible context of each of the statistics for example the GCSE's statistics do not necessarily include English Math and Science which are needed to move into further education and are often requested by employers. The table below highlights the type of provision and the number of students enrolled (**Table 3**)

**Table 3 College Provision**

<b>Type of provision</b>	<b>Number of enrolled learners in 2009/10</b>
<b>Provision for young learners:</b> 14 to 16	455 part-time learners
Further education (16 to 18)	2,250 full-time learners 347 part-time learners
Foundation learning	1,526 full-time learners 1,789 part-time learners

<b>Provision for adult learners:</b> Further education (19+)	779 full-time learners 5,859 part-time learners
<b>Employer provision:</b> Train to Gain Apprenticeships	1,288 learners 356 apprentices

**Source.** January OFSTED 2010 report publication

### 3.3 National Statistics

This chapter will analyse the retention rates of other colleges nationally helping to show the context in which the college operates. The Data Service identifies a total of 700 institutions to use in comparison for this study. Although there are more institutions nationally than this they have been filtered results to simply analyse the institutions similar to Olympic College. To begin filtering the national statistic data I started by highlighting the qualification level and selecting only level 3 options. Subsequently the college type was used to filter results, the options were General Further Education College including Tertiary, Other Public Funded, Private Sector Public Funded, Sixth Form College or Specialist Designated College. The college is a General Further Education College including Tertiary and as the study is based around the academic year of 09/10 this was also filtered. All age ranges were to be included and so this was used to identify the 16-18 years old and, the 19+ cohort. Other options were to filter the local offices which, are listed within each county. However, as the comparison is to be nationwide this was not necessary. Following this filtration, 700 institutions can be identified

as being of the same type of college, based on level 3 programmes and have completed in the year 2009/2010. They were sorted from the highest to the smallest retention rate.

Of the 700 institutions, the highest retention level was at North East Bury College of Technology which had 1,325 students start the course and retained 98% of them. Hounslow College in Essex followed with a retention rate of 96.6% having had 232 starters and thirdly Rufford College in Lancashire finishing with a 95.7% retention rate from 8,571 starters. The highest positioning for Olympic College was 209<sup>th</sup> having had 1,183 starters and completing with a retention rate of 88%, these were aged 19+. The second highest rate for Olympic College was 433<sup>rd</sup> of the 700 which showed a percentage of 84.7% in the age range of 16-18, there were 1,874 starters within this percentage. Finally the last rating was of 79.2% having started with 691 students this ranked 658<sup>th</sup> of the 700 similar colleges.

Linking this with staff interviews, one staff member suggested that Maxton has a high level of deprivation as discussed previously and this may have a significant impact, however the Socio- economic Performance Indicator provided by OFSTED would suggest otherwise. Currently levels of deprivation within communities are measured using the Index of Multiple Deprivation which was issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister but is now from the Department of Communities and Local Government. The Index

focuses on six elements these are Income Deprivation, Employment Deprivation, Health Deprivation and Disability, Education Skills and Training Deprivation, Barriers to Housing and Services, Crime and Living Environment Deprivation. In 2010 Maxton ranked 53<sup>rd</sup> out of 326 districts and the number of residents living in the most deprived 10% of England was 44,170. The Socio- economic Performance Indicator identifies the different colleges and provides charts highlighting the Index of Multiple Deprivation level and also the success rates, Appendix E shows that there are a number of colleges which have a higher level of deprivation than Olympic College but also have higher success rates. This would suggest that some colleges in areas of higher deprivation than Maxton still manage to have higher levels of success and so although this may have an impact it is not a determining factor.

### **3.4 Interviews**

I used focussed semi-structured interviews to gather data from staff. This was to help create a positive rapport with participants and encourage them to speak openly and freely about their opinions and experiences without too much prompting from the interviewer. It was vital that participants focussed on their opinions and experiences and were not influenced by the interviewer's position. To encourage honest interviews I avoided discussing my opinions and was very general in my responses, it was important that they were not aware of

my opinion and that the study was being carried out purely as an objective investigation. The interviews needed some structure to enhance the opportunity of gaining information on the specific topic of retention however asking open questions allowed the chance to probe the participant and explain in detail any answers of interest. As I am using grounded theory the use of open ended questions was suggested by Denscombe (2007) to encourage detailed responses. He also suggests the use of unstructured interviews and using field notes instead of observations for the same reason. All interviewees signed a consent form allowing the interview to be recorded on a Dictaphone and confirming that they understood the intentions of the study.

Denscombe (1998) discusses semi-structure interviews highlighting that interviewers have a clear list of issues to discuss however these are delivered in a flexible manner giving the interviewee scope to share ideas. A limitation of this method is exaggeration of the truth, a person may give untrue information meaning unreliable data, and also interviewing people on a one-to-one basis can be time consuming.

The limitation experienced was within data analysis which is discussed in a later chapter; the difficulty was identifying what was relevant and what was not and transcribing the longer interviews.

The time and location of interviews were the choice of the participants seeking to make them as comfortable and relaxed as possible. Barnardos (1995) explain techniques to ensure an effective interview, advice includes

1. Sitting at the same eye level, not too close or too distant, in a quiet comfortable private place
2. Asking for permission to make notes or tape recordings
3. Letting children hear their own voice on tape if they wish
4. Encouraging them by talking clearly, fairly slowly and not too loudly, keeping eye contact, looking and sounding interested (p.1)

Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) highlight the difficulty in knowing the interviewees; they highlight the difference in building a positive rapport and creating a “we” relationship. “The desire to build a rapport with the participant can transform the interviewing relationship into a full “we” relationship in which the question of whose experience is being related and whose meaning is being made is critically confounded” (p.459). They discuss other issues to be aware of include identifying “answers at random”, these are generally given when the interviewee has lost interest and is simply answering to hurry the interview along, which could provide unreliable data. Asking leading questions can trigger suggested conceptions which may confuse what is a genuine opinion and what is not. To provide reliable data liberated conceptions are encouraged in which

participants reflect on previous knowledge and answer after reflection, along with spontaneous conceptions which have possibly been reflected on previously. The pressure of an issue which is detrimental to a participant's job can influence the romancing of information, inventing an answer that is incorrect to simply hurry the interview along or please the interviewer. The difficulty in interviewing comes post-collection, transcribing is a time consuming process. I had allowed participants to talk for extended periods and so chose to use selective transcription to filter the information. This was coded using common themes, Delamont (1992) explains that "we should search for irregularities, paradoxes and contrasts as much as patterns, themes and regularities" (p.146) Computer software was not utilised for analysis as the literature recommends the use of the researcher's intuition and manual skills in analysis.

### **3.5 Questionnaires**

There were two questionnaires used in the study, the first created for completion by current students (Appendix C) of the college and another for withdrawn participants (Appendix D). Both were structured to firstly identify the age and gender of participants. This was useful in looking for a pattern however the withdrawn student sample was expected to be random due to the volume of non-responses. I originally sent paper based surveys out to withdrawn students whilst piloting the study and received no responses; this may have been down to a variety of things although having worked with

young people for 7 years I decided to use an online medium hoping that would be more attractive to them. Non respondents however can be bias and research carried out by Floyd and Fowler (2009) suggests that a study can expect a higher response rate from rural areas than inner cities and from people who have an interest in the subject matter. They also suggest that the non respondents maybe systematically different from your population as a whole. This is only one suggestion although it could support the low response rate from my withdrawn sample as they may have had less interest in the subject having had a negative experience of the college. The sample here was taken from the withdrawn student database in the colleges information system, a lack of reasoning for withdrawal made it difficult to sample but a selection of 50 were sent letters requesting their participation. They were filtered by level 3 learners and selected from a range of courses in college.

The online survey was available to people on and off campus and could be completed on other devices used by a lot of young people including phones and ipads. Petrick (2007) identifies the advantages of online tools being quicker and cheaper than alternative methods. She also goes on to identify the limitations particularly with the participant needing to have the skills to complete it online. Another disadvantage was having less ability to clear any misunderstandings with the participant.

The current students were first asked what they enjoy most about college this was to help identify aspects that influence students to stay at college and complete their course. They were then asked if they had contemplated leaving, I hoped gain an understanding of whether the average student questions completion and if so the factor that influences them to stay. The following questions were aimed at identifying if the right student was on the right course. Participants were asked if they spoke with an advisor before choosing the course and if they felt the course was as it was advertised to them.

Ascertaining errors at the early stage of Information Advice and Guidance is important having been highlighted as having a big influence in previous literature. Question 7 was to gain information relating to the second research question. However, this can only be answered based on opinion rather than personal experience. To acquire data focussing on the support students are given they were asked who they would approach for both academic and personal issues. Finally participants were asked what the college could do to prevent students from leaving. This question provides a platform for students to provide a response that isn't led by myself and would hopefully identify issues not previously discussed. . In total seventy eight students responded of the 100 asked, 62 of these were male. 42 were aged 16-18, 28 were aged 19-25 and 8 were over 26 years old.

The withdrawn student questionnaire was aimed specifically at the individual's reasoning for withdrawal, firstly students were asked

what course they were studying, this was to provide some basic course information as the questionnaire was completed anonymously. They then identified the factors that affected them and said whether these factors were main factors, partial factors or not a factor at all in influencing them to leave. Participants then had the opportunity to discuss what the college could have done to support them further; this was left open to encourage open honest answers. Question 6 and 7 are based around the support offered; they were asked if they chose to speak to a tutor before leaving and if they were contacted after leaving. Each question had an open ended comment box to provide an opportunity for further explanation. The questions comment box asked whether they had been contacted and if so, if they had found it useful. I if some of the withdrawals were down to students transferring onto another course therefore asked what the students were currently doing. I also asked if they would consider returning to the college, this would help identify if experiences had been negative to the extent of not returning in the future. Lastly students were asked to give any factors that the college could improve on and areas of support they feel would have helped keep them on their course.

Both questionnaires were created using an online survey tool “Survey Monkey”. This meant they were accessible quickly via the internet in college for current students and accessible away from college for the withdrawn students. Most of the students are teenagers and in my

experience teenagers have preferred online methods of form filling rather than pen and paper.

There were 14 withdrawn respondents in total of the 50 contacted, of the 14, seven were female and seven were male. Of these 14, five were aged 16-18, four were aged 19-25 and four were over 26 years old, and one person did not indicate their age. The courses being studied before withdrawal varied and respondents were previously enrolled on a range of subjects including Art and Design, Health and Social Care, Science, Beauty, IT, A levels, Humanities and Media. Given the small number, this represented a good cross section of the courses offered at the college with a small exception.

### **3.6 Focus Group**

I invited 50 students to attend a focus group to discuss the same questions asked in the online questionnaire. However, the uptake for this was minimal with only 9 participants, which was largely expected. The majority of the targeted participants were 16-18 year olds and this age group have traditionally been difficult to capture at college student meetings and enrichment events. Parker and Tritter (2007) debate the difference between a focus group and a group interview, which aided the research in concluding that the session was a focus group although questions were asked. They highlight the role of the researcher throughout this method and suggest that within a

focus group the researcher does not take centre stage but facilitates the discussion often between the participants rather than one to one discussion between researcher and individual. Bloor (2001) explores the feel of a focus group suggesting it should have an informal atmosphere and collectively the assumption is that the participants all have something in common with one another. He goes on to identify the similar elements of a group interview:

In focus groups the objective is not primarily to elicit the group's answers...but rather to stimulate discussion and thereby understand (through subsequent analysis) the meanings and norms which underlie those group answers. In group interviews the interviewer seeks answers; in focus groups the facilitator seeks group interaction. (P.42-43)

I invited student participants to this focus group using the incentives of a free lunch and on two occasions had no respondents however. On the third occasion to increase the chances of respondents I also invited groups that I had taught and this aided attendees. However, it must be recognised that this relationship may have made students act differently and even respond in a way that may be different to if they were being facilitated by a stranger. This would be a limitation to this method and must also be acknowledged when analysing data collected within a focus group. However, the debate analysed by

Parker and Tritter (2000) discusses how random sampling would not be appropriate for this method as the interaction of participants is as important as the content discussed. Poor attendance to focus groups is acknowledged by researchers such as Krueger (1993), and Parkers (2000) studies, Krueger suggests using a piggy backing method of sampling. This is sampling from another group or meeting which is planned to take place. I used this approach utilising the student rep meeting however this was unsuccessful. The group's participants expressed their pleasure in taking part and were delighted that their opinions were being sought. They said they were encouraged by the anonymity of their responses. The significant consequence of the group knowing one another was the synergy described by Kitzinger (1994) within the discussion. The rapport within the group created an even platform for participants to air their views.

The focus group consisted of eight males and one female, five participants were aged 16-18, two were 19-25 and two were over 26. The group was asked the same questions as the current students who completed the online questionnaire. However, the focus group participants were prompted to explain their answers further. In addition, discussion amongst the participants was encouraged.

### **3.7 Piloting**

Piloting of the instruments began in April 2011 and was carried out using staff members known to myself. These participants worked within my department and so this method was time saving and cost effective. The decision to use participants was based on the relationship already created and this was highlighted to them before hand. I explained why piloting the instruments was important and asked for as much honesty and analysis of them as possible to highlight areas of improvement within this process, this proved valuable.

The studies aim was discussed in-depth to ensure that they understood fully what the interviews and questionnaires were trying to investigate. The two staff members were interviewed using the original questionnaire and together reflected on the answers. The comments were very useful as each aspect discussed did provide developments. These included the assumption that staff understood exactly what retention was and that they knew the college retention strategies. To develop the first question I provided an introduction to the interview highlighting what student retention was, how it was being investigated and why it was of interest. The subsequent observation was that the answers were very long and I struggled to note down everything word for word. This highlighted instantly that recording the interviews via Dictaphone would ensure nothing is missed. The second observation made by the participants was that I

needed to prompt or add to each question to gain further information and so these prompts were added to the questions. The original design was to allow open questions with less structure hoping to encourage the participants to allow whatever came to them to be aired. However this was assuming that before the interview the staff member had discussed or thought about the issue of retention previously and the pilot participant needed the prompting. This was added to each question and these can be seen underneath each question in Appendix B. One example of this would be question 2 where the original question was “what retention strategies do you use within your team?” From the feedback this was improved to investigate further “how do you use them? Does your team use the same strategy across the board or do individual lecturers use different methods? This gave depth to each question and provided more support for the interviewee. The final change was the location of the interview. One of the participants at this stage felt that the location which was in a meeting room at the college made it feel as though they were taking part in a formal meeting. This made them feel on edge in discussing any areas for improvement within the college. This was changed to meeting the participants in a place of their choice to make them feel more comfortable and informal.

Both the student questionnaires were piloted using three current students however the withdrawn student questionnaire was difficult to pilot with the intended target participants due to the low response rate

of withdrawn students. Feedback from students' first highlighted that they did not like completing it on paper and that an online version would be better. This was acted on immediately. The second was that the question asking about the different factors proved difficult as they felt that there were so many options that can all play a factor although some have more impact than others. This was confirmed by an academic researcher Gillian Hampden-Thompson and so was changed to offer a main factor, partial factor and not a factor at all.

All the questions were given a comment box to encourage participants to expand on what they were saying. These include "if so why?" questions to collect reasoning for such behaviours. Each change made had a significant impact on either the clarity of the question posed, the opportunity for depth within the answers or the comfort of the interviewee.

### **3.8 Data Analysis**

I aimed to use exploratory data analysis to identify new elements in the data. The college had little recorded theories of its own to base a confirmatory investigation on. The data was analysed during July and August 2012 within the summer break at the college as collection extended over the planned period. Qualitative data was analysed first to allow time for selective transcription and additional time to identify gaps in the data and interview other staff members if need be.

Transcription was difficult as the open questions had encouraged staff to talk for longer than expected and so selective transcription allowed me to look at the language, identify common themes, highlight these as common themes and transcribe them collectively. Alternative methods included returning to the research question as discussed by Wellington (2000). He advises breaking the information up into small pieces or units and link them to the original research question. Whilst identifying common themes Delamonte (1992) (as cited by Wellington (2000) encourages the observation of irregularities and paradoxes, expressing that these differences are as important in the method of constant comparison and contrast.

The method of sorting data was done manually although the computer program SPSS was considered. The manual method was the most reliable for me to identify common themes.

### **3.9. Qualitative Analysis**

I used a Constant Comparative Method in analysing qualitative data after listening to each interview several times over. Field notes which were taken during interviews were used to index categories discussed this was to aid the transcription process as interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. Whilst indexing the different categories, quotes were transcribed to provide authentic evidence of participant's opinions and responses.

The three stage approach to data analysis discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994) proved too simplistic and so Wellington's (2000) method of analysis was adopted as it provided smaller stages giving clear outcomes for each. Miles and Huberman (1994) focus on Data Reduction which is collecting the data, summarising the different themes and sorting data into categories. The second stage, Data Displaying focuses on drawing conclusions from the data and displaying it in graphs and tables. The final stage is the interpretations of the data collected, giving it meaning and identifying comparisons to that of previous literature.

Using Wellingtons (2000) method of data analysis I firstly became immersed in the data, read the field notes on several occasions and listened to the recorded interviews repeatedly to gain an overview into all the aspects discussed and identify common themes posteriori, meaning that the data created the themes used rather than using pre-defined themes. The next stage was to stand back and reflect on the data, looking at the reliability of its limitations to the methods used and take time to notice new elements. From here the data was taken apart and analysed once again to categorise for a final time.

Triangulation of results also took place here linking student responses to staff comments and linking to previous literature. Within the method Wellington calls this Recombining and Synthesizing data.

The latter stage is referred to as Relating and Locating data and Wellington asks the following questions:

1. How do your categories compare or contrast with others in your literature?
  2. What are your strengths and weaknesses in your data and your methods? How do they compare and contrast with strengths and weaknesses of that of other studies.
  3. What frameworks, models have been applied in or developed from other enquiries, to what extent can they be applied in yours
- (p. 138)

After considering these points I continued analysis until reoccurring themes were identified and a lack of new elements were present.

Wellington describes this as knowing when to stop, which should be when the researcher feels confident in making generalisations.

Once all the data was summarised and coded into solid themes the last stage was to present the findings in a clear, fair manner making them as coherent as possible and selecting the most relevant quotes to be used objectively.

### **3.9.1 Quantitative Analysis**

The national retention statistics were the main source of quantitative data collected. These were analysed using the computer program Excel although SPSS was considered but was not necessary. The Data Service organised statistics into tables which then allowed sorting and filtering. Retention was filtered from the highest to the lowest and the top three establishments discussed in relation to Olympic College's position. The quantitative data analysing the Socio-economic Deprivation Index was presented in graphs by OFSTED and so was analysed by identifying where Olympic College was in relation to colleges of similar status. This data was then linked with qualitative data from staff interviews. The results from Survey Monkey were presented as tables and graphs to draw measurements from and saved time.

### **3.9.2 Ethical Issues**

The British Educational Research Association (2004) has clear guidelines to follow whilst carrying out educational research. They highlight issues related to the design of the research, the methods employed, analysis of the data, how the study and participants are presented and the drawn conclusions and findings. "Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process to which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and

to whom it will be reported” (p.6)

The sampling of staff and students were strategically chosen however as discussed by Welling (2000) there is never an opportunity to guarantee a completely representative sample unless you sample 100% of the population which would not be a sample. I assumed that there are similarities between the students selected and the ones not but this cannot be confirmed, it can only be assumed that the total of 101 students sampled represent a portion of the rest of the level 3 learners studying at the college. This sample is very small in comparison to the population of the college but a little larger in comparison to the total of level 3 learners. Staff from different levels of curriculum and management in the chosen departments were selected on the assumption that these would be representative of staff across the level 3 programmes but this cannot be confirmed. It would not have been ethical to select staff that do use retention strategies well and those that do not as I would first have to assess what was considered using them efficiently.

Within this study selected participants within the staff sample were asked to partake and were given in writing the plans for the study. Each participant was contacted via email to ensure that they had the information to reflect on after the decision was made. It was made clear to all participants that they could withdraw from the study at any point and that this would have no effect on my relationship with them

or the college. Participants within the student samples were asked to partake and were told verbally in front of the staff member in that class that they did not have to take part. Some members of groups chose not to take part saying “they couldn't be bothered” others said there “was no point” and some gave no reason. Although all students were aged from 16 years old some of these are considered vulnerable learners and so I checked the British Educational Research Association (2004) regulations for guidance as to the rights of a child. It stated that

The association requires researchers to comply with article 12 of the united nation conventions on the rights of a child. Article 3 requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration. Article 12 requires that children that are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent. (p.7)

Consent was facilitated by the staff member present.

Participants of the staff sample signed consent forms authorising their

interviews to be used in the study, to be recorded via Dictaphone and to pseudonyms being used to hide participant's identities. I chose to keep participants anonymous to encourage interviewees to be as open and honest as possible without concerns for their roles within college or a negative response from other colleagues and this was commented on. Most of the participants were happy to be kept anonymous although one member of senior management said they were happy to have their name issued with their comments.

All participants within the staff sample were assured that their information and recorded interviews would be kept secure and the interviews were stored on password protected computers and ensured that screens were logged off whilst not in use. These precautions were in my control and meet Privacy laws, Barnordos (2011) confirms "Appropriate measures should be taken to store research data in a secure manner. Researchers' should have regard to their obligations under the Data Protection Act" (p.3). The Legislation Government (1998) website houses The Data Protection Act 1998 and states that people have the right to see any documents stored concerning any personal data. All participants from staff and student samples were given my name and department within college and were told that they could view their responses at any point. The student's data can only be identified by date and time as this was anonymous. Participants were assured that data would be treated with confidentiality unless something was disclosed that may cause harm to another person or themselves.

In contacting withdrawn students the assumption was made from previous literature that there would be a low response rate and so used an incentive to encourage their participation. BERA (2004) discuss the use of incentives with the design and reporting of research and say that it can become problematic in creating a bias in participant responses. There were no responses to the interview invitations, all withdrawn participants completed the online questionnaire which was expected.

Other methods of research design were considered however I felt that the current design was reliable and ethically sound. For example the method of using a control group would have meant one group of learners being treated differently to another. This could have had a negative impact on their experience at the college and a consequential effect to the quality of their overall grade. Other considerations included note taking and recording staff interviews to ensure notes were reliable and not to sensationalise results. The findings have been presented objectively so not to falsify or distort data to provide my predetermined conclusions. The review of previous literature avoids criticising other researchers and is purely for the interest of the college, it is not funded nor being used for commercial gain.

Flaws in the methods used are highlighted and accepted, these errors may have added to the limitations of this study. The semi-structured interviews were often longer than expected and the interviewees

spoke about issues that were not directly related to student retention. They talked about aspects unrelated to the research question; this caused issues in analysing qualitative data. Once analysed I aimed to communicate the data and its significance in a way that was honest, clear and in a language that is appropriate for the target audience.

## **Chapter4**

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**The findings of the first research question asking what do staff feel are the factors affecting student retention on level three programmes at Olympic College?**

This chapter will analyse the current retention strategy used by the college and qualitative data collected in response to the first research question and link results to previous literature.

### **4.1 Current Retention Strategy**

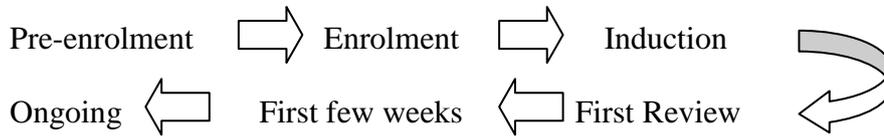
To gain a deeper understanding of the current practices at Olympic College I analysed the current cross college retention strategy being used at the college. This is available to all staff on the staff portal which is an interactive site that the college uses to post announcements, house policies and link to all data systems used by the college for registers, timetables and student records. The strategy has not been updated since the academic year 2006/2007 meaning some of the sections are out of date. The aim of the strategy is to

1. Improve overall retention from 81% on 2004/2005 and increase to the current 2006/2007 benchmark of 86%
2. Improve long courses to above the benchmark of 75%

The first section is dedicated to the learner's journey, the diagram below (**Diagram 2**) shows the different stages in a learners journey in which the college aims to identify any interactions that may cause

barriers for learners. Staffs are asked to examine their contribution to each stage and adapt input to further aid student success.

**Diagram 2. The Learners Journey**



The strategy acknowledges the importance of improving retention at the college, “Improving retention will not only benefit the learners who successfully complete courses but will also ensure the college consolidates its financial position” (LSC, 2006). The strategy is in sections including Sharing of Good Practice, the introduction of the new Curriculum Learning Centres and a focus on Teaching and Learning. It states that all staff should have relevant subject qualifications, have studied a Post-graduate Certificate in Education and take part in training and development opportunities on a regular basis. All staff should expect to be part of formal observations. Members of staff are to discuss teaching and learning and good practice at team meetings and are encouraged to conduct small scale action research projects. They are also asked to discuss pedagogy and their approach to learning as well as sharing good practice in teaching and learning with staff.

The next section is titled “Provide work placements for all full time 16-18 learners”, here the strategy guarantees all 16-18year olds studying a full-time programme a work placement in a vocational area

appropriate to their course to enhance employability and make students feel that the college is preparing them for a realistic career. The review of this policy highlights that issues with CRB checking employees, risk assessing and health and safety regulations have not allowed this to be possible

Improving Keyskills procedures and delivery is the following section and concentrates on embedding Keyskills into fulltime programmes, providing one-to-one sessions with literacy and numeracy specialists or dyslexia tutors. Embedding Co-ordinators posts have been created to provide vocational areas with support, these were appointed within the review of the strategy in June 2007. Attendance Monitoring was highlighted as a way of monitoring absentees quickly and supporting them in improving their attendance.

The cross college retention strategy highlighted areas that the college are still developing and elements that previous literature observe as important. However the strategy was out of date and so much of the information was no longer appropriate. For example giving every student an opportunity for work experience is unrealistic in a town that has some of the lowest employment opportunities in the county particularly for people aged 16-18. The Maxton Community Strategy (2012-2015) confirms that

This is the case across the country as a whole;  
youth unemployment is high with 12.7% of 16-24

year olds claiming out of work benefits. This represents well over twice the rate for the working age population as a whole and almost 35% of all claimants in Maxton (p.4).

Plans for the embedding of Keyskills across college are no longer as necessary due to the introduction of Functional Skills. The Curriculum Learning Centres have been functional for more than 3 years. There will be a strategy to replace this one, renamed a Success Strategy but this is not yet available to staff on the portal.

#### **4.2 Findings of the First Research Question**

This chapter will analyse the qualitative findings of the first research question investigating the factors reported by staff that affect student retention on level 3 programs. A major theme that emerged from the staff interviews was concerned with the issue of the quantity of students versus the quality of the students in terms of qualification and ability. Every member of curriculum staff (five in total) interviewed said that they felt the quantity of students on their course is the priority rather than the quality. When quality is discussed staff are referring to the capability of that student in terms of the likelihood of successful completion. An example may be if a student has the minimum entry requirements for the course but may struggle with the level of literacy that is required or may have previously studied on a course and found to have poor attendance, behaviour or commitment.

All curriculum staff indicated that the college should be prioritising student quality and making sure the student is well suited in terms of interests and qualifications to the course they are enrolled to. This quote is a typical response from staff members. "People think that they have got a target to hit and it's important that they fill their courses and therefore I think that can be in conflict with putting students on the right course....it will be self-defeating"(Emily Allen, Principal).

It appears from the staff interviews that courses are currently being judged on their Minimum Level of Performance (MLP), this is a national statistic, the college also has a MLP benchmark. MLP is a term used to standardise quality, The Skills Funding Agency (2011) define it as the way "a provider shows whether the provision is above or below a success rate threshold." A course is classed as inadequate if success rates do not meet the Minimum Level of Performance. A member of the Senior Management team explains that "If we can't get courses to at least benchmark we won't be running them, the priority is quality" (Emily Allen, Principal).

From the interviews, it is apparent that the curriculum staff interviewed understand the message from Senior Managers concerning selectivity and enrolling students that are capable of the chosen course. However, the staff do not appear to trust the message and instead use their experience of recent redundancies to guide the decision making when recruiting. One curriculum leader said "The

message is to be selective and get the right people on the right course but the underlying message is if there are not enough students you don't have a job" (Hannah Smith, Curriculum Leader).

This comment is probably in light of the redundancies that occurred after the college experienced a restructure in 2011. The restructuring resulted in some long serving members of staff losing their jobs due to financial difficulties and changes in funding structures. It seems apparent that the message from Senior Management is to get the right students on the right course. From the interviews it emerged that course leaders are aiming to carry out diagnostics earlier than done previously and ensure students are provided with advice and guidance before enrolment. However, it seems the fear of job losses plays precedence in decision making. A Curriculum Leader expressed these views, "everyone's thinking tighten up the entry criteria but then you are thinking we need numbers to guarantee hours for staff" (Gary Steel, Curriculum Leader).

The current funding system at the college means the consequence of this often shows itself after the vital six week period in which a student can leave or be transferred with no impact on the success data. The college has a six week policy to assess students, alternative courses can be sought before the transfer period finishes. After this period all students enrolled to the course will be counted within final success data and have an impact on funding the following year.

Support staff had a range of interesting observations whilst being interviewed which highlighted the way academic and personal support are handled, it seems that the role of the tutor and expectations from students are not clear. According to Craig Davies who has worked as part of the student Services unit and Safeguarding team for nine years, not all tutors understand that students have an expectation of them to provide personal support along with academic. “Some academic staff are better than others with the care and the time and the amount of help they give, some are very good, some consider they only have teaching hours...” He also explains that as part of his support role he has experienced some serious pastoral issues that have been referred to him from tutors, in which personal issues are having a negative impact on a student’s experience. This indicates that a positive student and tutor relationship has a significant impact in highlighting opportunities to provide further support. He explains the importance of the sharing of information between tutors, Student Liaison Officers and Safeguarding Officers “It’s important that that dialogue is there...it may presents as bad behaviour in a classroom or nonattendance whereby if some of these things are really bad then attending college is lower down the scale of what is important to that student”.

Rachel Lee a Student Liaison Officer explains how she is often passed withdrawal forms from tutors without having had any input or referral from them previously. She feels that instead of referring early so support can be initiated some tutors do not work close enough with

the support team. This lack of communication can impact significantly on whether a student stays or leaves.

Rachel Lee and Robert Palmer both discuss how the volume of safeguarding issues have increased recently they also share similar theories in respect of support. Craig Davies feels that the college lost a lot of the preventative support strands in the restructure and so the majority of the current issues take a direct route through the seven Student Liaison Officers. Previously issues were identified, monitored and referred through the Personal Development Coordinator (PDC) , these roles were used to “add greater coherence to the range of safeguarding activities undertaken across the college and provide a close level of support for students which is integrated into the pastoral provision within the courses”(Role of the PDC). The loss of the Enrichment Officers has also been highlighted by staff as negatively impacting the pro active preventative support.

Rachel Lee explains that without them and the change in the Town Centre Common Room in which they were based, asking for support now seems a lot more formal. She mentions that approaching the Reception areas and asking for a Student Liaison Officer seems much more formal than the previous system in which Enrichment Officers offered a drop in one-to-one service in the common rooms every day. A student may be asking for contraception, wanting to speak to someone whilst upset and may feel uncomfortable standing and

waiting in the foyer to be seen, she adds how important she feels the common room spaces are, “it gives them the extra space and ownership of somewhere in college, this gives them a space to chill out and access us. (Rachel Lee, Student Liaison Officer)”

### **4.3 Qualifications on Entry**

A shared opinion from curriculum staff which links to student quality is the difference between a student’s qualification and their capability. This study lends itself to Level 3 learners that are learners studying the equivalent to A levels. One Senior Manager discusses the consequences of misjudging a student’s ability. For some of the Level 3 courses at the college there are Level 2 options available that can be offered to students who may need to build skills before committing to a level 3 programme. Level 2 programmes are the equivalent to GCSE’s grade A\*- C, but unfortunately this is not the case for all the courses. Ideally all courses would have a Level 2 option to avoid students failing early on in their educational journey.

If we put them on a course that they are going to fail, we are damaging them anyway because A, they will not get the qualification, B it will hit their confidence, we are better off in my book particularly at level 3 saying to a student I don’t think your skills are quite at

the right level at the minute let's put you on a level 2 (Tracey Herbert, Senior Manager).

Departments are encouraged to develop curriculums to include Level 2 options. However, many have not yet introduced these. According to the Principal "Every curriculum area ought to have Entry 3, L1, L2 L3 and L4 to enable them to progress within the local area" (Emily Allen, Principal)

The wider problem of GCSEs not being indicative of ability was supported by all of five curriculum interviewees along with Senior Management, which relates to recent changes in GCSEs discussed in the literature review.

#### **4.4 Attendance Monitoring**

Prior to the restructure one strategy used by the college was the use of "Attendance Monitors" whose role it was to contact absent students as early as possible and monitor those at risk. One lecturer interviewed said "Attendance monitors were fantastic and I don't know how I am going to cope, they would phone the students straight away and email us to tell us why they weren't in"( Emma Lewis, Lecturer) This opinion was common amongst curriculum staff. Collectively they all had concerns as to the monitoring of absences and the speed in which they were able to react to a student not being present in class. The Curriculum Leaders interviewed were concerned as it's a large part of

their role although during an OFSTED inspection leaving a classroom to call an absent student would be seen as unacceptable, one Curriculum Leader confirms “You can’t just go out of your room to call somebody” (Hannah Smith Curriculum Leader). Jointly there seemed some confusion as to who was to take over the role of absence monitors; whether Curriculum Leaders were to contact all students, the curriculum offices or the new Student Liaison Officers? The review of literature highlighted the importance of monitoring absenteeism and so the staff responses have similar views.

#### **4.5 One-to-One Time**

A member of Senior Management stated that “Unless you monitor those students that are at risk early doors and capture them and try and put in support mechanism you will undoubtedly lose them” (Tracey Herbert, Senior Manager). This statement was supported by the curriculum staff interviewed although opinions were that there is little one-to-one time with students to do this. The current tutorial system in college is based around one hour tutorials per class a week and this is regarded by curriculum staff interviewed as too little time to identify students at risk and provide regular support. One Curriculum Leader explains how she is the personal tutor for 70 students and has tutorial for one hour a week for 30 weeks which gives each student 26 minutes one-to-one time over the course of 30 weeks. She goes on to explain that she has to prioritise students who she knows have issues and are at risk however others go unnoticed and are not given enough

one-to-one time to discuss issues that may affect their achievement. Another tutor who agrees there is little one-to-one time expands on this and says that she used to use the 14-19 development team. This team consisted of Enrichment Officers that coordinated the tutorial system, provided one-to-one mentoring for students and signed-posted external agencies for support with alcohol, drugs, sexual health mental health and various other pastoral issues. They also had drop-in services available every day, Elizabeth Grice, Curriculum Leader said she used the Enrichment Officers on a weekly basis for one-to-one support” the 14-19 team were invaluable for that...what do we do when someone is having a meltdown in class?” (Elizabeth Grice, Curriculum Leader). Four of the five curriculum staff said they did not feel they had enough time to give individual students to efficiently identify and monitor risk. These findings relate to the literature in which the impact of personal reasons was highlighted as having a negative effect on a student’s ability to stay the duration of the course, this was discussed by Kuh (2004)

#### **4.6 Communication with Staff and Parents**

Participants also commented on a lack of communication within their course teams. One member of staff explained that some members of staff in the team work across different campuses and so they are often unable to communicate effectively with team members. Other barriers include the use of agency staff and their timetables. The timetables do not always include time for team meetings and some staff do not

regard retention as something they need to concern themselves with. Helen Drew (Curriculum Leader) goes on to say “You need to be working as closely as possible...Tutors are not singing from the same hymn tune” (Helen Drew, Curriculum Leader). The current system means that some tutors teach a variety of units or modules over numerous courses and attending each team’s meeting is not always possible. Four of the five participants confirmed that meetings are useful in discussing issues affecting retention. However, there are seldom whole team meetings due to these barriers and the daily communication in the college staff room seemed to be the most effective method for identifying and monitoring student issues.

Gary Steel (Curriculum Leader) discusses the current college policy regarding communication with student’s parents and guardians. College staff cannot speak to the parents of a student about their son or daughter without their consent as it is against the Data Protection Act 1998. However, four of the five curriculum staff felt that this hindered communication between them and parents. Gary also felt that “it’s dodgy if they are over 18 to phone them but it helps.” This staff member explains that it helps to contact parents and get their support in working with the student however to contact parents of a person over 18 is breaching privacy and the Data Protection Act 1998 if it is not done with the person’s consent. The existing approach, according to the participants, is that they send out letters inviting students and parents to parent evenings.

However, they generally receive very few responses and the parents that do attend are not the ones that tutors really need to see. In addition, students have to give permission for the tutor to speak to their parent. Gary Steel explains that it would be beneficial if students signed at the beginning of the year to say staff can speak to parents if the student is at risk of failure as well as for their own safety. He goes on to say how he feels students do not always respond to pressure about missed deadlines and absences and how speaking with parents early on would help. “They are quite savvy, they soon pick up on the fact that they cannot fail and so if it’s not in by Friday so what?” (Gary Steel, Curriculum Leader) This comment also mentions that students become aware that within their qualification they know they cannot fail a unit and they can resubmit work until it passes even when it is late. Mr Steel feels that without contact with parents it is difficult to provide support for some students and so the workload increases as they work their way through a backlog of late submissions.

#### **4.7 Staffs Views of Retention**

There were mixed responses when staff were asked if they knew the cross college retention strategies and where they could find them.

Three of the five curriculum staff members said they had never been introduced to the cross college retention strategies formally. One curriculum leader said “I use them on REMs” (Helen Drew, Curriculum Leader) however the strategies are not available on

REMs. REMs is the online system that houses the electronic registers, the student and staff personal data and timetable etc. A Student Liaison Officer was asked the same question and replied “No, should I know? Is the strategy just to keep them here?” (Rachel Lee, Student Liaison Officer) Both statements suggest that staff do not have an awareness of cross college retention strategies. One Curriculum Leader who did know what they were and where to find them said “I am aware of where they are and how to access them but only actually because I have looked recently” (Hannah Smith, Curriculum Leader). Before the interviews staff were told that they would be discussing cross college retention strategies. Hannah continues,

I don't think there is a time really when anyone other than on a divisional level where it's really being discussed or worked through in any detail.

What tends to happen is we have the general meetings and some figures are thrown at you about it. But I think that is the only time it's really mentioned. (Hannah Smith, Curriculum Leader)

This opinion could explain why other participants did not know where to find the strategies put together by the college. The same Curriculum Leader also went on to say

On a college wide level looking at the documents on the portal is quite interesting really because I don't feel that that has been disseminated to us and obviously with information like that in teams we could have spent time working through things...not necessarily saying that what we do is bad practice but it could be further developed. (Hannah Smith, Curriculum Leader)

The participants that did not know where the cross college retention strategies were gave the impression in their answers that they were shocked and felt that this was something they felt they should have been aware of.

The staff responses to the question asking "What do you think are the factors that affect student retention" were similar to those in previous studies, in particular Martinez (1997). The question was left open as providing multiple choice answers would not have resulted in any unexpected or detailed answers. The table below (**Table 4**) shows the most common responses. An internal factor would be an element that the college has some control over for example the quality of teaching or the wrong course. An external issue would be something out of the college's control for example family issues or pregnancy.

**Table 4, Internal or External Factors reported by staff members**

<u>Internal Factors</u>	<u>Responses</u>
Keyskills	1
Changing timetables	1
Poor Resources	2
Wrong course	2
Removal of Personal Development Co-ordinator/Senior Personal Tutor	2
<u>External Factors</u>	
Work	4
Minimal support from home	3
Pregnancy	2
Less work ethic	1
Parental issues-losing jobs	1
Educational Maintenance Allowance	1
Finances	5
Parents wanting them to work full time	1
Poverty	1
Traditional parents from an ethnic minority	1
Family issues	4
Childcare	1

From the table it is clear that the most common staff responses were external factors and finances were the most common factor. This is supported by some of the interviewee's statements in which two

curriculum staff members do not feel that the college experience had anything to do with any of the students leaving. However both of these members of staff are from an area that had the lowest retention in 2008/2009 and had an average retention in 2009/2010. Emma Lewis replied “If students are going to leave they are going to leave...I have not lost any students because of teaching or anything else they have experienced in college” (Emma Lewis, Lecturer). Unfortunately, a lack of data collected by the college when students exit means that this cannot be confirmed. The Curriculum Leader of this area said she felt the reasons for withdrawal were “External influences, issues at home, kicked out, no support, no money no resources” (Helen Drew, Curriculum Leader). This is an interesting statement as the same tutor later confirmed that the retention rates have improved in that subject area as there is now a full team and some consistency. Within this Curriculum Leaders team the tutors now work on the same subject units as the year before and so can improve it from experience. This would indicate that internal influences do impact student retention as the change in tutor and subject area would not have an effect. Another interesting point was made by a Curriculum Leader in a subject area that had the highest retention in 2009/2010. Hannah Smith commented that “Retention is about also helping to look forward to things, whatever course you’re on you’ve got deadlines, however amazing the course is you can feel bogged down by things but it’s the little incentives, we all need them in life don’t we” (Hannah Smith, Curriculum Leader) This tutor focussed on how to keep students

motivated and engaged and accepted that some factors were in our control as a college. This relates directly to Martinez (1997) who discusses some common responses from teachers to issues of retention. These include the five d's.

These being (1)Denial-we are doing as well as expected , (2) Displacement-It's not our fault, it's the fault of management/ government/ students/ the local context, (3) Disbelief – The research is wrong, (4) Despair – we can't do anything about student retention and lastly (5)Determination –we can and will do something to improve student retention. (p8)

A member of Senior Management discussed the different attitudes of staff and how she felt this impacted on retention.

We have got some fantastic staff in this college that go all out to make their lessons interesting, interactive and motivating for the young people, sadly we have some staff that don't recognise that and they will go in year after year and anyone in the right mind would say the students are not engaged (Tracey Herbert, Senior Manager)

This is not to say that Emma Lewis and Helen Drew are tutors that do not engage students it merely points out that some staff are of the opinion that students withdraw due to external factors alone and do not recognise the impact of internal influences.

One member of staff interviewed discussed the pressure of retention and how she often feels that it is difficult to withdraw a student who is negatively impacting other learners. The disciplinary procedure currently moves students up a stage at a time as issues arise although two tutors felt that even when a student gets to the final stage they are often told to keep the student as it will affect retention data if this student is withdrawn. “You feel like A the system doesn’t support us to get rid of them and B if they are gotten rid of we would be sort of told because of our retention, it’s a really critical decision but one person leaves but that positively affects the group” (Hannah Smith, Curriculum Leader)

Finally staff were asked if they feel that retention is a priority at the college, all of the staff said they thought it was a priority. The comments that followed explained how one Curriculum Leader sees retention across college. Elizabeth Grice pointed out that she hears “Retention, retention, retention but then they never say how we’re going to do it or how shall we work together to do it, it’s just a case of get on with it.” She went on to explain that it came across as something Senior Management consider it to be a priority but that she did not feel supported in how she could improve it, “I think the

figures of retention are a priority of senior management, how it actually comes about they are not really all that bothered about because they are taking away all the support mechanisms that we had...it's going to be spread a bit too thin" (Elizabeth Grice, Curriculum Leader)

The Principal's outlook was that retention can be impacted on at any point and it is within the entire journey of a student that factors can become apparent; she confirms that currently elements are disjointed.

I think it's the whole package that comes together that stays from the minute the student applies to the minute they submit their final assessment and beyond into ambition for employment and progression the whole package just works and we have bits that are disjointed and not connected enough at the moment (Emily Allen, Principal)

To summarise the points made it is clear that some staff don't know what the current retention strategies are or where they are accessed; although the cross college strategy was created in 2006 and is out of date. Staff discuss their fears in recruiting low student numbers, failing to guarantee hours for staff. They explain that having lost the Attendance Monitors they do not know who is responsible for following up absenteeism and want this clarifying, chasing up

absenteeism as early as possible was highlighted by Martinez (1998) as an effective retention strategy. Staff know that the courses are judged on the Minimum Level of Performance and so aim to achieve the highest success rates possible however they express that they do not know exactly how to do this and would appreciate more guidance. Some staff do not think that they influence a student's decision to stay or leave and only highlight factors controlled by external forces as having an impact. These findings fitted with the Martinez (1997) and the theory of the 5 d's. Other discussions in the interview centred around needing more one-to-one time to support students and more options of Level 2 courses to support the transition from GCSE to Level 3

#### **4.8 Additional Issues**

The issues discussed are those that had appeared a number of times during the interviews and are considered common themes. Additional issues were mentioned including incorrect data on the REMs system which is used to store registers, enrolments and student information. Gary Steel (Curriculum Leader) commented that issues in College Information Systems which process the enrolment and success data meant that last year's results included three people that were never on the course. Unfortunately, these were transferred onto a different course and did not attend the original course at all but the final retention and success data still included them.

The IT facilities were criticised for not working effectively causing student frustration and problems in class. One curriculum Leader Hannah Smith felt that Moodle, the college's online e-learning resource centre is useful but that it has had its time and Olympic College does not use its full capabilities. The socio-demographic of the town in which the college is located was highlighted as a factor by Craig Davies, a Student Support and Safeguarding Officer who suggested that the college was in an area of deprivation. He thought this may account for low retention rates. As discussed in the Chapter 2, the context of Olympic College, the official Socio Deprivation Performance Indicator suggests that colleges in much more deprived areas have better retention and success rates than the college.

Elizabeth Grice, a Curriculum Leader discussed the tutorial programme and that it had less room for enrichment and that the student review system or Individual Learning Plans created too much paperwork. She also mentions that the "At Risk" Questionnaire, which was used to assess students in terms of risk, was not as useful as it could have been as students completed it based on how they thought they were doing which was not always indicative of their performance. A further point was that the support students received in class was not always consistent as support workers changed frequently which does not provide consistency for the student being supported. Hannah Smith, a Curriculum Leader said that due to this issue last year she intends to put all students with an additional need in one group to increase the chances of consistent support in class.

This relates to another aspect mentioned by a tutor, that when a tutor is absent on sick leave the class is not covered efficiently and there can be a lack of tracking of individual progress in units. This can lead to a backlog of work upon their return for the staff member and the students, they struggle with the “...workload and keeping up with the amount to do” (Helen Drew, Curriculum Leader). To finish it was highlighted that middle management give a vision for retention but at Senior Management level it is not disseminated and that they could work closer with teams so teams understand how they fit into the big picture.

## **Chapter 5**

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**The findings of the second research question asking, what do current students and students that have withdrawn feel are the factors affecting student retention on level three programmes at Olympic College?**

This chapter will analyse the qualitative data collected in response to the second research question. Students currently studying level 3 programmes were asked to complete the questionnaire online during the course tutorials (see Appendix C). This questionnaire was used to help identify what students enjoy whilst studying at college, their experience of college services and importantly what the motivating factors are that encourage them to complete their studies. Many responses centred on enjoying socialising, individual career goals, having a positive learning environment and their personal experiences. One limitation of the questionnaire is that current students are asked to comment on the reasons that other students leave. This has to be summarised objectively as it is purely opinion, however expecting a lower response rate from withdrawn students meant that current student views were another viable option. Current students were asked what they enjoy most about college. This was an open response in which they could indicate any aspect of college life. Of the seventy eight current participants, 27 students reported that

they enjoyed socialising with friends and 27 students said that they enjoyed learning new things. Responses such as these relate back to the literature, Hill (2011) highlighted intrinsic motivation, if students are attending because of their passion for learning and enjoyment of socialising the chance of them staying on the course is higher. Student E commented that they enjoyed “coming into college and socialising with my class mates also I enjoy some of the topics that I learnt about”. The second most common answer was the positive learning environment. Other answers included “small timetable, having two days off, no exams and a nice environment”. Seven participants reported enjoying studying something that they will one day make money from. Student F indicated that “The lessons are about subjects that I study and are really enjoyable to me and help me learn more about the career I would like to go into in the future. The tutors are sociable and give a relaxed teaching atmosphere” (student F). Other reasons given were doing practical work, passionate tutors that you can have a laugh with, long breaks and the freedom

Of the 78 current students, 35 have considered leaving, 19 of those said they stayed to continue learning, four stayed after advice from a tutor, two took advice from family members and two spoke to friends. Other answers included being “too stubborn to leave” and that they had already paid for the course. One comment from Student G read “Taking an outside look at my life and deciding the qualification would be more beneficial to me rather than a short term

job”. While another student (H) said the “desire to succeed and help from some tutors and relaxed deadlines” prevented them from leaving. Thirty-four of the 78 current students did discuss their options with a college advisor before starting their course, 24 of these 34 said they found the guidance session useful, one participant replied

I had applied for a level 2 course but after talking it through with my tutor during the interview, we decided because I'd just finished a level 3 course it would be better to apply for the level 3 course, which I am currently on now, I believe this was a sensible change and I have since benefited from the advanced course. (Student I)

Another current student said it was useful “...because I told her the Student Advisor what I wanted to do with my life and she pointed me in the right direction” (student J). This comment indicates that these students do find the guidance sessions useful. A different current student mentioned miscommunication was an issue within the session saying “it helped to clarify a defined path, however, there was only a mention of Keyskills and it was put to me as an option, it was later revealed that it was mandatory, because the government said so”. This student was not aware that they would have to do Keyskills which is a qualification in Maths, English or IT. The aim of the

qualification is to improve these basic skills and must be completed by all students whilst studying at the college if they have not already done so.

Sixty one current students agreed that their course was as it was advertised while 17 said it was not. Two students mentioned issues with Keyskills one student (K) said “I wasn’t aware that I had to do Keyskills” another student (L) said “the prospectus made no mention of the mandatory Keyskills”. Other changes to advertised courses with modules being taken out and replaced with others and less practical work than they had expected were other issues raised by the respondents. One student explained that “initially the tutor we had was not teaching us to the level 3 standard I was lead to expect from the college” (student M).

Current students were given a range of factors that they thought may have prompted other students to leave. An example of one of these factors is “family commitments”. The students had to grade each factor as either (1) main reason for leaving (2) a partial reason or (3) not a reason at all. The most common main factor selected that was considered to have the biggest impact was leaving to get a job; 33 students felt that this was a main factor, along with 33 that selected heavy workload and a lack of motivation. Difficulties with numeracy and literacy and selected personal issues were identified by 44 students. The quality of teaching was suggested as a partial factor by

39 students and a lack of motivation was chosen by 36 of the 78 students. Students were able to insert an open comment. One student (student N) said that “some students lately tend to be lazy” another said “they were on the wrong course from the start”. The highest factor that students felt would not impact on a student leaving was a lack of friends. The limitation here is that these are purely current student opinions although these students may have an insight much more realistic and relevant to that of staff in this matter.

Question 8 asked, “If you needed personal support who would you approach?” Forty six of respondents said they would first approach one of their subject lecturers. Thirty students indicated that they would speak to their Curriculum Leader and 21 said they would speak to someone in Student Services. Fourteen students said they would not speak to anybody in college. Only 10 of the 78 would approach a Student Liaison Officer, 12 of the 78 would speak to staff in the common room and only two of the 78 would approach Connexions, which is a youth service used nationally to support young people with work and personal development. Of the seven open responses, three comments mentioned the preference of speaking to friends, three indicated that they would speak to family members and one said they would talk to their fiancé. Students were asked who would they speak to if they needed academic support with their work; 64 indicated the Subject Lecturer, 37 selected the Curriculum Leader and thirdly 11

students indicated that they would approach staff in the common room.

Students were asked to suggest how they think the college could support students further and prevent them from leaving. Most responses centred round providing students with more academic and personal support. For example, one student (O) replied “help them more, and try to eliminate work overload so they have plenty of time to do one assignment without worrying about the other”. Another common answer was concerned with the need for the college to provide better teaching. Student P said “ensure that all subject areas are unique and attempt to appeal to all students i.e. an IT course gets pretty boring when all you’re doing is staring at a monitor all day”. There were a range of answers including making classes more interesting, arranging more trips, paying students to attend college, spreading assignments out and marking them quicker. All these suggestions can be linked to Martinez (1997) and the importance of good quality teaching. Some respondents did not know what improvements to suggest and six students said do not change anything.

I think that it isn't something the college is doing, I think it is the mentality of the students, as they complain that the work is hard and blame teachers when in reality the teachers are really good, they

practically spoon feed us the work, but the students mess about way too much (Student Q).

Other suggestions were to be more flexible, support students in settling in with friends, demonstrate what they can expect to get from the college possibly through videos and evaluate how students feel.

The following quote was indicative of a number of comments.

provide an environment where the needs of the student take precedence over that of financial commitments. They need to remember that while they answer to the powers that be, they also work for the students and as such that should take priority (Student R).

In summarising the findings, it is clear that students also identify a variety of factors which combine to affect a student's retention. Most current students identify that they enjoy socialising, learning new things and the positive environment experienced at college. Some mention that they are motivated by working towards a career in their chosen subject. Most of those who have had information and advice and guidance via Student Services at the college found it useful. Half of the students have considered leaving at some point but most have stayed to continue learning. They felt that leaving to get a job; a lack

of motivation and a heavy workload were the main factors that affected student retention. Other common responses were problems with literacy and numeracy and personal problems. Most of the participants also identified that they would approach their subject lecturers for academic and personal support. The findings here relate back to the previous literature and support many of the previous findings. Most of the issues identified by students are internal; they centre on expectations of a course, teaching and support

### **5.1 Focus Group Results**

When asked what students enjoy most about college the collective responses were seeing their friends, learning new topics and software. These students were within the area of computing and so this would be subject specific, this cannot be generalized to include other areas as students approached were reluctant to give up an hour of their time, even with a free lunch incentive. They discussed enjoying the feeling of “getting smart” and growing up as well as receiving their Education Maintenance Allowance. The allowance is a means tested bursary of between £10 - £30 a week that will no longer be available after 2012.

All nine said they had considered leaving the course they were studying. It was suggested by these participants that most students contemplate leaving at some point. Their reasoning for staying ranged

from friends encouraging them to stay, not wanting to leave because they knew they would have to get a job, fear of being in trouble with parents for leaving, and thinking about the year that would have wasted.

Four of the nine participants indicated that they did have guidance from a Student Advisor before choosing the course and all said this was useful. The remaining five participants did not feel they needed it. The student focus group was asked if they felt the course they had received was as it was advertised and explained to them. All the participants indicated that this was not the case and that they felt the course titles were misleading. They said that certain subjects that were only a small part of the courses content were used to sell the course. Others were told that little subject knowledge and experience was needed for the course they had chosen, however, they felt they needed prior subject knowledge and experience in order to achieve higher grades.

The group struggled to rate factors that contribute to a student leaving as they said they vary for different people. However, they felt most factors would not stop a fellow student completing their course.

Instead there was consensus that a number of factors occurring at the same time often result in students falling behind with work and then struggling to work through it. One student explained that “when we have personal problems it creates a backlog of work, with a backlog

of work comes a lack of motivation and this is normally the problem” (Student S). When pressed each participant chose one factor that had impacted them personally whilst in college. Three said they had lost motivation, two indicated that they had struggled with personal matters, two said a lack of friends to begin with, and two said the course not being what they expected had made them consider leaving. A lack of motivation and dissatisfaction of the course links with the previous literature discussed by Tyssen (2012).

If experiencing personal problems, six of the participants said they would speak to Subject Lecturers and Curriculum Leaders because they see them on a regular basis and know which tutor they would feel most comfortable talking to. However, three students said they would not speak to anybody in college. All nine students said they would approach the same staff for academic support although they did not indicate why this was. Finally, the group suggested ways that the college could support students further and prevent withdrawal. The answers were lengthy and the majority were the collective opinions of all nine students. They suggested that the college was widely considered by the local community as being weaker than the neighbouring colleges. The participants felt that it is a widely accepted opinion that students only attend their college if they are unable to attain the results to enrol at the neighbouring one. They suggested that some regard their institution as a specialist college for foundation learners not for those studying at A level. They collectively claimed that their parents had supported this, encouraging

them firstly to look at the other college as A levels were worth more than vocational qualifications. They believed that the impact on them as students was that they did not feel proud to be attending the college and thought that other institutions could provide a better experience. There is an ongoing debate in the UK about the value of vocational qualifications in comparison to academic. A levels are classed as academic, they are theory based and students complete exams along with coursework. Vocational options include qualifications such as BTEC, NVQ and many are practical subjects completed through coursework and practical pieces. For example a student wanting to be a builder would study an NVQ in Brickwork in comparison to an A level student who may complete 3 different subjects such as English, Biology and Sociology. The vocational qualifications vary in value; an extended BTEC National Diploma is the equivalent to 3 A levels and so provides enough UCAS points to apply for university. An article in the Guardian titled “Universities are failing students with vocational qualifications” explores some of the debate and say that some universities do not know the value of some of the vocational qualifications and so struggle during the administration process, they feel that A levels are a safe option and mean a better chance of the student being successful. They state that a person with a vocational qualification is less likely to be accepted into a university and is more likely to drop out in the first year and so are a risk to accept. The article doesn’t discuss the social class element however A levels have a reputation of being linked to the higher paid upper middle class

career options and these are attractive particularly to parents planning for their son or daughters future.

The whole group believed that being more realistic when advertising the courses would stop students getting their hopes up and being disappointed. The design of the courses was an issue for three focus group participants suggesting that they had very difficult units all delivered together. They went on to say that some units were not as intensive meaning they felt intensely pressured for one semester and then had completed work early on the next. They suggested that units be weighted better to ensure a more constant workload in each semester and across the year. The impact of poor curriculum design was highlighted in the review of literature by Cook (2012). All nine of the students were disappointed with failing technologies whilst on the course, complaining of issues with passwords, network problems, and generally poor computing facilities. A final point that participants made, related to the fact that they felt pressured to complete additional qualifications. In some cases they were advised to complete a shorter separate qualification, which they complete whilst on their main programme. They conceded that completing these funded qualifications provided learners with more knowledge and aided the college financially. However, the students said this was introduced later than the rest of their units; they did not want to complete it, and felt that it was not mentioned when enrolling. They

expressed how annoyed they were in being “forced” to complete these extra qualifications.

In summary the focus groups responses were similar to those of the current student questionnaires in which they highlighted enjoying socialising and learning new things. The entire group had contemplated leaving at some point and those that had advice and guidance from Student Services said it was useful. All confirmed that the course currently being studied was not as it was advertised and that failing IT equipment had caused problems for them whilst studying. They expressed an annoyance in completing additional qualifications and also said that they felt the college had a weaker reputation in comparison to the other local colleges. They concluded that there was not one factor in particular that influenced a student to withdraw however a lack of motivation and a backlog of work were the main factors.

## **5.2 Withdrawn Students Results**

A selection of withdrawn students completed a questionnaire investigating the factors that (1) prompted them to leave (2) how the college may have prevented them withdrawing and (3) how they felt about their time at college. They completed the questionnaire via Survey Monkey and results are below.

When asked what the main factors were that prompted them to leave the most common answer was the quality of teaching (seven withdrawn students), the second most common factor was that the course was not as expected and personal problems ( five withdrawn students). No withdrawn students indicated that finance was main factor; this supports Dearings (1996) who states there is little evidence that financial factors have a significant impact on the choice to leave a course early. These results can be found in Appendix G

Students identified factors they considered had the least impact on their choice to leave; all 14 students said that pregnancy had the least impact on their choice to leave college. This was expected as the sample was male dominated. Leaving to get a job was chosen by 13 students and 11 students said that a lack of friends was never an issue. The results for partial factors showed that all factors played a part except leaving to get a job, family commitments and pregnancy. Financial issues were the highest partial factor with four students selecting it. Students commented about their personal reasons the first said Student A said “felt quite directionless and couldn’t find the right path for me”. Student B left to do an apprenticeship and Student C named a tutor that they did not like. Student D said

When a college is advertised it is usually a totally positive outcome, during your college stay for example the college will say all the positives and not mention the negatives because they don’t want

to mention the negatives in case they don't get  
many students turning up to college.(Student D)

Students were asked what the college could have done to prevent  
them from leaving; the quotes below show the responses.

1. Two students answered “nothing”
2. “Not ready to commit and didn't speak to anybody before  
leaving”
3. “The workload and teaching set out properly and when the  
head of the course who synched all our work and teaching  
went on long term sick, someone should have been able to  
step into her role. Also not being able to experience the area  
that I want to go into didn't help via placements.”
4. “Show more concern and talk to me”
5. “It wasn't the college it was a specific tutor”
6. “Nothing as I needed fulltime employment”
7. “Hire better and more friendly staff”
8. “Help me more they knew I needed help”
9. “College teachers could have given students more space  
rather than constantly pestering them and saying that they need  
support. Colleges should not be glamorised as much as they are,  
the people who speak to you at the interview should give a

legitimate review of what to expect to get from college and what is available and give a balanced opinion from students who already attend the college”.

Eight of the 14 students did speak to an advisor before leaving and three of the eight said it was useful. One student said they did stay and finish some more units before leaving and another moved onto a different course after guidance. After leaving the course 10 of the 14 were never contacted again although two of the students that were said they found the call helpful.

Question 8 asked if they would return to Olympic College and 12 of the 14 said they would. They were then asked if they felt they were given enough support and if not what did they need, the results are below (Table 5)

**Table 5. Student Report of the Support Needed**

<b><u>Support needed</u></b>	<b><u>%</u></b>
Needed academic support	37.5
Needed personal support	28.6
Got the support they needed	28.6
Needed support for an Additional Learning Need	7.1
Needed to be challenged more	14.3
Needed more encouragement and Target setting	7.1
More support from home	0

The destination of the withdrawn student's show that 10 students are now studying at another college and four of the 14 are studying at Olympic College but on different courses.

See Appendix D for all withdrawn questionnaire results.

To summarise these findings results of the withdrawn student questionnaire identify poor quality of teaching, the course not being as expected and personal problems as the main factors of withdrawal. Finance does not seem to be a main factor although it is identified as a partial factor, students identify that withdrawal is influenced by a culmination of factors. Martinez and Munday (1998) also highlight the complexity of the variety of factors within the previous literature. Some students admitted that they were not ready to commit to the course and there was nothing the college could have to done to stop them leaving. Other factors included the poor service received when staff were off sick and a lack of support received, most of those that used Student Services found it useful.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusions**

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This chapter will analyse the main findings of the first and second research questions investigating what staff and students feel are the factors that affect student retention on level 3 programmes. Away from the detailed results some general inferences can be identified, the triangulation of staff interviews, current student results and withdrawn student data highlights some important information. The first theme identified was student expectations and how these were created but not fulfilled within the college. The role of the tutor and the support requirements was the second theme. Both staff and students lack an understanding of what is expected of them which creates disappointment. The importance of socialising and the social integration needed to settle into the college system effectively was identified as having high importance, this theme also looks at the services available at the college and the utility of such services. A further common theme from results of current students centred on the environment, attitudes of people and the affect that a positive learning environment has upon the student experience. Accurate information, advice and guidance from student services was recognised as having an impact on student expectations. Lastly students shared opinions about the external perceptions of the college and staff concluded that the local colleges prove difficult competition for the college.

## **6.1 The Main Factors Identified**

Results of the current student surveys and focus group conclude that half of students that participated had considered leaving their courses early at some point which brings in the question what makes them stay? Of these 50%, the most common reason for staying was to continue learning and complete the qualification being studied. This supports the responses given when the students were asked what they enjoy most about college and Hills (2011) discussion of intrinsic motivation. The most common result was the feeling of learning new things, working towards a career and others identified the motivation of learning something that will one day make them money. Relating back to Martinez (1998) as previously reviewed, it appears that half the students at one stage or another weigh up the cost of staying or leaving their course and a range of other factors impact that decision. This highlights the motivation for attending college and shows that these level 3 students are inspired to progress, Hill (2011) and Martinez (1998) also suggests that progression goals are of great value to students and that they stay in education because they feel it will improve future prospects.

The factors mentioned by current students compared to that of withdrawn show significant contrast. Current students acknowledge that there are a range of factors that come together which contribute and influence a student's decision to stay or leave. Woodley (1987) supports this theory.

If we are to arrive at a more complete understanding of why an individual drops out it seems that we must move beyond the usual “checklist approach”. We must take into account what participation means to an individual and the total context in which he or she is studying. We must treat dropping out as a complex process in that it generally involves numerous interconnected factors and often builds up over time. Finally we must have a greater awareness of how people explain their behaviour, both to themselves and to other people. (p.162-163)

They identified the most common main factors were a lack of motivation, a heavy workload and leaving to get a job. They thought that personal matters, problems with literacy and numeracy and family commitments were also partial factors but not the main ones. These are comparable to the factors identified by staff who mentioned leaving due to finances, family matters and to move into employment. The differentiation of staff views compared to students is vast, staff highlight only external factors and interviews confirm that some staff members feel that poor retention is not in their control. This also confirms one of Martinez (1997) comments in response to staff views. This shows that some of the staff at Olympic College are in “denial” about the issue of poor retention. They also show “displacement” of

responsibility identifying that the issues are not their fault as well as showing “despair” exclaiming that they cannot do anything about it. (p8) The staff within the college must first accept responsibility for some of the factors affecting student retention before it can be improved.

Withdrawn students results identified that finances were not a main factor in their decision to withdraw and the main issues were the quality of the teaching, the course not meeting expectations and personal problems. They also had very different views about the importance of friendship groups in which 85% said that a lack of friends was not a factor at all, but none mentioned support from friends. A lot of current students identified that socialising was one of the main factors that they enjoyed about college and mentioned the positive influence of friends whilst considering leaving.

This relates to staffs opinions in which the quality of teaching was only mentioned by a member of senior management, no academic staff identified this as a possible reason. This may show poor self assessment of academic staff as the college has a large proportion of teaching and learning observation that are grade 3 which OFSTED deem as requiring improvement. I questioned if staff really did believe that their teaching and curriculum bears little influence on student retention or do some staff feel pressured to ignore poor quality teaching due to pride and what others may think? This is also the case for a lack of motivation, workload and course expectations,

staff and student opinions of these factors also differed. Of the 17 different factors mentioned in staff interviews only five of these were internal. However, students identify the majority of factors as internal issues that are in the colleges control and aspects that staff may have an influence over. Could it be that students want to accept less responsibility and so choose to blame others? Action research studies rely heavily on qualitative data. There is the question therefore as to whether people’s experiences and opinions can be seen as objective, particularly those from withdrawn participants. If a student was on the right course but was lazy, was not mature enough to deal with the social situation and denied all the help offered by staff members, would that student admit to some of those issues or would the responsibility be passed to the poor quality teaching he felt he received or the lack of help given? The table below (**Table 6**) shows the top six factors that students enjoy most about college, it is clear that each of these are internal influences that an institution can influence. One example of an external factor mentioned only twice is the EMA bursary; however this is not something a tutor can provide as it is means tested.

**Table 6 What do students enjoy most about college?**

Learning new things	27	Learning something I can make money from	7
Socialising with friends	27	Good quality teaching	6

A positive learning environment	12	Passionate tutors	6
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Table taken from the current student questionnaire results

## 6.2 Teaching and Learning

This is the second of many themes identified in the results. Students have identified that they have expectations that are not met and this impacts negatively on their experience. The withdrawn participants identified that they were not satisfied with the service they received. In particular they highlighted that the quality of teaching was disappointing and they had expectations from their courses that were not met. The college was inspected by OFSTED in November 2010 and the quality of teaching was highlighted as something students had fed back as an area of improvement. OFSTED reported students wanted to improve “uninteresting theory lessons so that they have more variety of work” they also mentioned “Keyskills lessons.”

The overall inspection outcome was a grade 3 which was then titled satisfactory; this has since changed to requires improvement. Grade 3 was given to the Outcome for Learners and for the Quality of Provision, some of the suggestions for improvement from OFSTED (2010) were

Improve the quality of teaching and learning by  
increasing the focus of the internal lesson

observation system on the quality of learning and by ensuring that teachers use a range of activities, including the use of ILT, to challenge and engage all students. Ensure that teachers use effective questioning techniques to carry out frequent checks on learning and that they use challenging and specific targets in individual learning plans in order to analyse students' progress more closely. (p.6)

A selection of the withdrawn students said to prevent them from leaving, the college could have done “more practical work”, “show more concern or talked to me”, “try and support me more and give me more help” and put on “extra classes”. This implies that the quality of teaching has had a negative effect on student retention.

Not all withdrawals were down to the quality of teaching, one learner confirmed that there was little the college could have done, and they explained that “I think I was not ready to commit myself. I did not speak to tutors about leaving” and another left for full time employment. Tutors regularly say that they have little time to prepare lessons with the current teaching hours. The current practice for a full time tutor is to have 26 hours class contact which is made up of teaching a range of units often over more than one course. Appendix F shows an example of a current member of staff's timetable where a working day starts at 8:30am and finishes at 5pm. The empty sections

show the time available to plan classes, prepare resources, mark work and complete paperwork such as disciplinary issues, chasing up absentees, sending letters home and general administration. Staff report that they do not have enough time to prepare the quality of lessons that they know would provide a better experience for learners, this could be linked to the change in funding within colleges of Further Education . The increase in participation following the change in school leaving age means that colleges must prepare to accommodate more students. However there has been a reduction in the participation of 16-18 year olds in England of over 20,000. The drop in these students and low success rates in previous years equates to less funding in the following years, meaning staff and resources are stretched further. The funding is coordinated by the Young Peoples Learning Agency and aims to allocate funding based on teaching and learning, support for the disadvantaged and students with additional learning needs.

### **6.3 The Role of the Tutor and the Support Given**

The student data shows that the majority of students would approach their subject tutor and curriculum leaders for both personal and academic support. One could say the traditional role of a tutor was to teach the subject, assess the work and discipline poor behaviour however it seems that students have an expectation of their tutors to provide personal support. Support staff highlighted a lack of

continuity in how some tutors support students with personal issues; they explained that some academic staff do not feel it is their responsibility to spend time out of lesson supporting a student with personal issues. This makes issues difficult to identify and also difficult to deal with. Other staff members discussed the lack of social spaces since the restructure and new build within college; this may discourage students who require support from approaching support teams in such formal environments. Staff must be aware of the expectation of students, use tutorial time effectively and identify that academic and personal support is needed to create an enjoyable learning experience. It is also important that students know what support teams are available, where they can be found and use these services and personnel to support them whilst studying.

#### **6.4 Socialising**

The students' feedback suggests that socialising is an important part of college life and 27 of the 87 current students said this is what they enjoy most. The college has social spaces for students to use in break times, lunchtimes and free periods although as mentioned before the common room space at Town Centre has been changed. Currently students at both the Wharton Campus and Town Centre Campus can use the canteens refectory space, the Curriculum Learning Centre social areas and the Common Rooms to spend leisure time with friends. The data suggests that a lack of friends can have an impact on a student's decision to stay or withdraw, 44 of the 87 students

questioned said they felt that a lack of friends is a partial or main factor in deciding to withdraw. Withdrawn students did not support this opinion which may highlight the difference in attitudes towards friendship groups and socialising as discussed previously. Helping students settle in initially and supporting them in making friends is something staff are encouraged to do but this could be an area for improvement.

### **6.5 Environment and Attitudes**

Current students mention on numerous occasions within the question asking what is most enjoyable about college, the environment and the attitudes of tutors. 26 of the 87 current students mention the attitudes of staff, the positive environment or the quality of the teaching they received. Some of the comments mention “having a laugh with tutors that can take a joke”, “I enjoy the theory input and the fact that our tutor is so passionate about her profession”, “teachers don’t hold to a plan so much to give time to learn and explaining assignments to make them easier to pass”, “the tutors are sociable and give a relaxed teaching atmosphere” and another says “the relaxed and enjoyable environment”. The perspective of current students is very different to that of the withdrawn students which may indicate the impact of the different teaching methods across college.

## **6.6 Initial Advice and Guidance**

Only 43% of the current students did receive Initial advice and guidance which means that more than half of the participants were not guided and advised before enrolling on the chosen course. This may relate to some of the withdrawn student comments as one participant said “Felt quite directionless and couldn’t find the right path for me” whilst another said “I think I was not ready to commit myself”. The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (2009) highlight that research has evidenced that career learning information advice and guidance can improve retention, achievement and progression through

Equipping learners with the skills and competencies necessary to make really well-informed choices, including choosing subjects linked to career goals. The career-related skills cited included career exploration, self-awareness and self-confidence, and support progression by enabling young people to make more effective transitions (p.6)

Of the 38 that did receive Initial Advice and Guidance 28 said that it was useful, these students said that the sessions were useful because “I told her what I wanted to do with my life and she pointed me in the right direction”. One students said “the advisor explained what we will be working with on every course and helped to choose what’s

best for me, this one has subjects I like and want to work in this areas after college.” Other students explained that they appreciated the choices they were given, the details of the course contents and that they had applied for an inappropriate level course and the advisor had changed this to a more suitable one. Robert Palmer who works at the college as a Student Liaison Officer explained that he felt the college gives a lot less advice and guidance and this was worrying for the approaching year as students often find they are on the wrong course when it is too late.

### **6.7 Realistic Expectations**

Twenty percent of participants said that the course they studied did not meet their expectations and so the college may need to look at the reason for this. This supports the earlier literature as well as Swains (2012) recent suggestions in recruiting honestly to ensure student’s expectations are realistic. A withdrawn student commented “When a College is advertised it is usually advertised as a totally positive outcome during your college stay, for example the college will say all the positives and not mention the negatives because they don't want to mention the negatives in case they don't get many students turning up to the college” This quote is an honest reflection giving the expected reasoning for positive promotion. Is the marketing misleading; if so is it in the marketing of the courses content, the advice and guidance given by Student Services or in the interviews given by subject tutors and curriculum leaders? The common responses are in relation to the

course content and this can be down to a range of issues, the main one being staffing. Within a Level 3 course there may be 18 units to complete and each of these units are led by specific tutors who have expertise in that specific field. When a member of staff is off ill or needed on another course the Curriculum Leader may have to change units to include subjects that the team can deliver. From a student's point of view this can mean a subject being replaced with something else or being moved later in the year. A curriculum leader confirmed that when a member of staff is off ill in most cases the classes are covered by tutors that teach in that department but not necessarily on that unit and so are unable to support the students effectively. This was acknowledged by students who also mentioned that they became disappointed if they had been led to believe that they were studying a particular topic and it then did not happen. They also noted that this could impact on future plans for university or career aims. One example of this would be student T who said "we didn't build computers", Student U said "we were lied to about taking apart computers" and Student V said "they have dropped some of our modules without consideration." Other comments included that Functional Skills were not mentioned in the prospectus. After researching this it was clear that Functional Skills was in the prospectus however the wording could be considered misleading. The guidance within most courses and on the Functional Skills page explains that "All fulltime students will have the opportunity to develop their functional skills and our dedicated team of staff will

ensure that you have the support you require”. It fails to mention that Functional Skills is mandatory for all fulltime students that have not already completed them. Students confirm in the questionnaire that “the prospectus made no mention of the mandatory Keyskills”. Suggestions for ways that the college can prevent students leaving include providing realistic expectations at the start of the course, this could be by having current students part of the induction process, allowing questions and answers to include previous students experiences. Student W suggested “A demonstration of the course module, preferably visually using video clips, teaching approach and practical practice of the modules”. The detailed suggestions from these students are encouraging and are simple developments for the college to incorporate into current practices.

## **6.8 External Perceptions and Competition**

The focus group discussed in depth an issue that only a support member of staff had highlighted, namely the external perception of the college in comparison to the highly successful sixth form nearby. The collective opinion was that before attending the college they thought that it was second best to St James College, and they explained that their parents were also under the impression that studying A levels was a better decision than studying for a vocational qualification. This is not an uncommon perspective and is discussed in depth, one member of the focus group said that he was under the impression that the college specialised in Foundation programmes and

working with students that had additional learning needs. Craig Davies (Safeguarding Officer) said “On our doorstep we have a very strong sixth form college; they are strong on the academic side although they do some vocational stuff.” As a Student Advisor in his previous role Mr Davies has experienced the perceptions of parents and students and says that he feels this is still an issue for the recruitment of students now. There have been schools that have their own sixth forms that have been reluctant to allow the college in to promote courses to those students leaving compulsory education. He explains

there are still quite a few sixth forms in Maxton schools with good names and they tend to jealously guard their students I would say, I believe that traditionally we have had trouble getting to promote vocational courses at these schools in year 11 and presumably in doing so they probably feel that if they don't hang onto their students and the cream of the crop so to speak for their sixth form then there is a chance that they will lose their sixth form and there's always the chance that that could have very serious ramifications for your school as a whole including funding prestige and the staff and students you can attract.

Craig Davies (Safeguarding Officer)

The focus group concluded that they felt a lot of the colleges students enrol at Olympic College because they have not got the grades to attend St James College and so the college miss some of the most dedicated and hardworking students to other colleges and sixth forms with more reputable A Level results. Craig Davies suggests that improving retention at the earliest stage is a three-pronged approach, firstly looking at parents perceptions of the college, secondly ensuring students understand what they are aiming for and how they can achieve it and lastly working with schools to encourage them to move students to the most beneficial place for them, “You have to recruit with integrity and impartiality” Craig Davies (Safeguarding Officer).

## **6.9 Summary of Conclusions**

This chapter will summarise the partial factors identified previously and triangulate the experiences of staff and students. The Socio Economic Performance Indicator concludes that there are colleges with higher levels of deprivation that have higher success rates than the college. This would suggest that although staff members may feel that the students are at a disadvantage in comparison to other areas this should not have a significant impact. However it should not be forgotten that previous literature does highlight the impact poor finances has on mature learners.

The curriculum staff interviewed discussed their concerns since the restructure in 2010 and although the clear message from Senior Management is to enrol the right student on the right course, some Curriculum Leaders openly feel the pressure to recruit as many students as possible to secure teaching hours for the staff in their teams. The experience of the restructure has had a lasting impact on staff and there is a lack of trust in the messages communicated. The communication between Senior Management, Lecturers and Curriculum Leaders has also been identified by some staff as being particularly poor. Curriculum staff mentioned that although retention is discussed they do not understand how to improve retention and what strategies to use. Opinions suggest there is little evidence of sharing of good practice although this term is used a lot, the staff question how this should be done. This statement is supported by the out of date retention strategy as although retention is regarded as an important factor, the college houses a policy that is five years out of date.

Staff at the college must accept that more internal factors are highlighted by previous literature and by the student participants of this study in comparison to external factors. An acknowledgement of the vital impact that the college, its staff and services play in retaining students is needed before the college can begin identifying further strategies to support these issues. Teaching teams must attempt more

critical and honest self assessment of current practices and increase the level of student feedback gathered. The lack of student data collected and evaluations of the students' experience poses problems in identifying the areas of development in a learner's journey. The suggestions gathered in this study from current and withdrawn student have been detailed, constructive and indicate that when given the opportunity to provide feedback it can prove valuable. The college does hold regular student rep meetings however the college often struggles with attendance to these. Although this is a proactive strategy in communicating with students, a fresh approach may be needed. It seems that without student reflections staff are guessing what the factors are that affect student retention and the low retention figures may indicate that as a college we are getting this wrong.

The retention figures for level 3 programmes at the college are lower than average however 12 of the 14 withdrawn students highlight that they would return to the college. This would suggest that they have not had a lasting negative experience of the college but they did not receive the service expected. A suggestion from one student was to have current students part of the induction process to provide a realistic student perspective of the course and highlight the highs and lows of the student experience. Staff may feel uneasy about hearing negative comments but these may help provide more accurate expectations for students starting the course. Staff and students

highlighted the poor service received when encountering staff absence, this is a difficult time for other staff members whilst covering classes however from a student perspective this should not mean a change in the quality of the service provided.

The college has a history of grade 3 inspections which could indicate that the range of issues are imbedded within the culture of the staff and practices. These are not necessarily conscious inadequacies but issues that some staff may not even be aware of. Could it be that some members of staff have been performing a certain way for such a long time that they simply do not know any other way of performing their roles? Has the restructure and the redundancies created a further pressure for staff to avoid asking for support in their professional development? Are they being honest about having skills that are out of date or methods that are not student centred? This may be an area for further investigation.

There has to be some acknowledgement that there will be withdrawals and that not all withdrawals are preventable; some may even be more beneficial to that student or the other students in that class.

Withdrawing a student may mean that other students in that class can be successful and enjoy their experience; this may be a positive withdrawal in the long run. If a student finds full time employment in a job that they will be successful and happy in this would be a positive withdrawal for that person's development. However the college's lack

of reasoning for withdrawals does not allow for analysis of the different reasons given. This can only be improved with more reliable data collected on the students exit. This relates back to the method of recording withdrawal reasons, whose job is this and how does the college ensure that this data is reliable and completed objectively? Will a student say to the Curriculum Leader that they felt their lessons were boring and they did not provide enough support and from this will a Curriculum Leader record officially that they were highlighted as providing a poor service? The recording of this data may need to be done by an impartial person.

The monitoring of absences was highlighted as an area of confusion amongst some staff members; they discussed the difficulty in leaving a class to follow up absent students. This is an issue that needs clarification to ensure this is followed up in a timely fashion. Student Liaison Officers confirmed that some cases of withdrawal are passed to them without them having had any previous awareness of the student. This would suggest that some retention strategies in place are not being used effectively. Where there are strategies in place the college may need to monitor how effectively they are being used as a system is only ever as good as the person using it.

The literature reviewed is supported by many findings in this case study; the majority of factors highlighted by students are of an internal influence. These include the design of the curriculum, the

style of teaching, unfulfilled expectations and a lack of support. The culmination of factors discussed by Martinez and Munday (1998) is supported along with the importance of intrinsic motivation discussed by Hill (2011) and Tyssen (2012). The external factors were found to impact a student's decision to stay or leave but these were combined with whether a student was enjoying the course and felt they had the support to deal with the issues presented. It was identified that more than half of all the students in the sample had considered leaving but most had their intrinsic motivation to encourage them to stay. The withdrawn students identified more internal issues and dissatisfaction with the course than current students; this is mirrored in the previous literature. Staff and students do have very different opinions in the factors affecting student retention and staff identified more external issues which did not correspond with student opinions.

### **6.9.1 Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

Overall a range of factors have been highlighted and these support many conclusions highlighted by previous studies although the results of this study cannot be generalised and are only applicable to Olympic College. The limitations as discussed previously lie in the qualitative data which relies heavily on the staff and student opinion which may hold a level of bias and this was also collected from a small sample in relation to the student staff population. My role as a practitioner may also have created predetermined interpretations although the awareness of this and desire to gain fresh perspectives has inspired

and motivated this action research case study. Further study will be carried out to monitor the changes in data collection, recruitment and evaluation of student experiences. The findings of this study will be disseminated within Olympic College to share with colleagues and management and lay a foundation of practitioner investigation. This is with a hope that the information may support future developments, be used as a reflective resource and later develop to show the changes made within the college in 2 years time.

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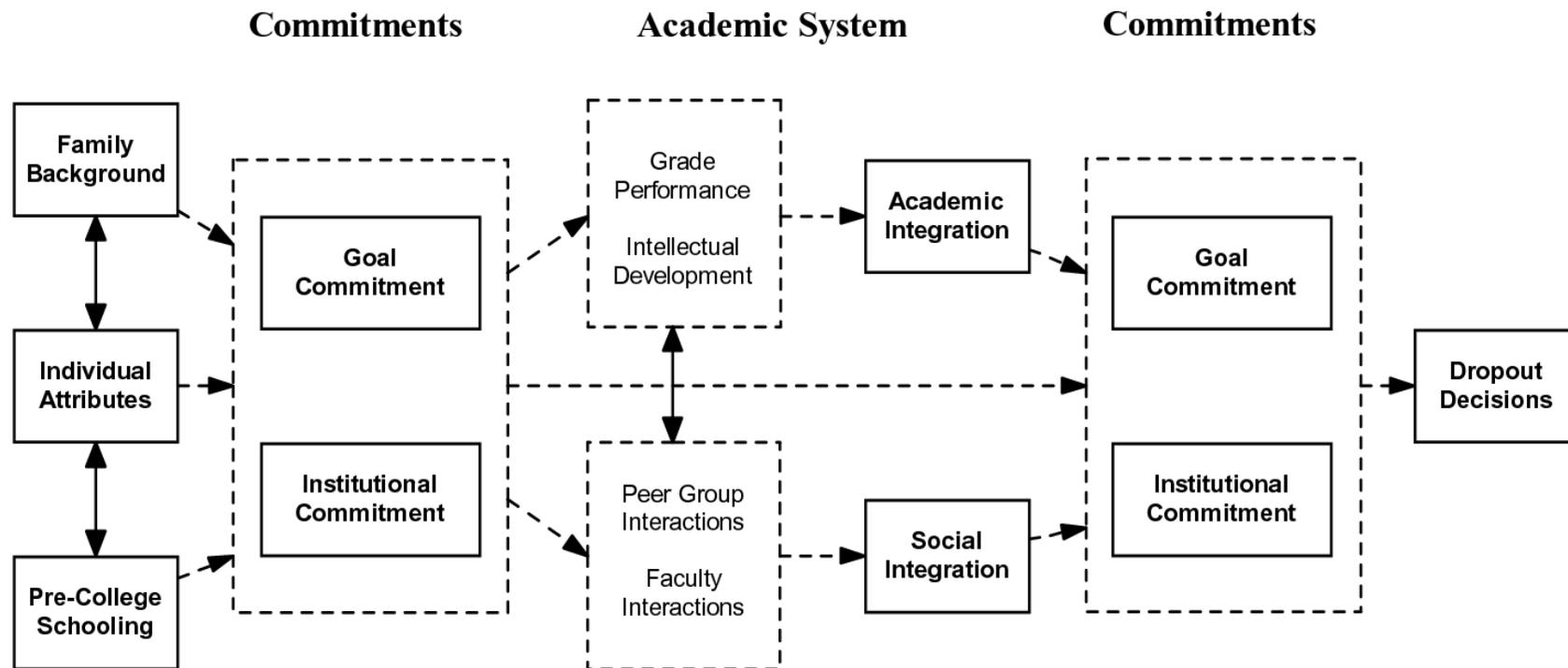
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## Appendix A

### Tintos Theory Model



## Appendix B

### Curriculum Staff Questionnaire

1. Are you aware of the current retention strategies and where would you access them?

**Were you introduced to these officially? Do you feel that these are made to be a priority?**

2. What strategies do you use within your team?

**How do you use them? Does your team use the same strategy across the board or do individual lecturers use different methods?**

3. How often are these strategies used and monitored?

4. Do you feel the current retention strategies are effective?

**What benefits have you seen in using these strategies?**

5. Do you feel that there are areas in need of improvement and if so what improvements would you make?

6. What are the factors that affect student retention in your area?

**Do you think these have changed over the years?**

7. Have you noticed any recent changes in these factors?

8. Do you feel that student retention issues are addressed quick enough to provide effective support?

**What barriers do you come up against in addressing issues surrounding retention?**

9. How do you feel the college could improve student retention?

## Appendix C

### Current Student Questionnaire

**Why do some students withdraw from their courses early?**

**\* 1. Gender**

Male

Female

**2. Age**

16-18

19-25

26+

**\*3. What do you enjoy most about college?**

**\*4. Has there been a time that you considered leaving your college course early?**

Yes

No

If so, what made you stay?

**\*5. When choosing your course did you discuss your options with a college advisor?**

Yes

No

If so was this useful, please explain your answer

**\*6. Do you feel that your course is as it was advertised and explained to you?**

Yes

No

If not how is it different?

	Not a Factor at all	Partly a factor	Mainly a factor
Personal Matters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial Problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literacy or Numeracy difficulties	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To get a job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family Commitments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of Friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quality of Teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Course not being as expected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Heavy workload	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of motivation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Other (please specify)

**\*8. If you needed personal support who would you approach?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> One of your subject lecturers | <input type="checkbox"/> Staff in the Common Room |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Your Curriculum Leader        | <input type="checkbox"/> Connexions               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student Services              | <input type="checkbox"/> Nobody in college        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student Liasion Officers      |   |

other

**\*9. If you needed academic support with your work who would you approach?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> One of your subject lecturers | <input type="checkbox"/> Staff in the Common Room |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Your Curriculum Leader        | <input type="checkbox"/> Connexions               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student Services              | <input type="checkbox"/> Nobody in college        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student Liasion Officers      |   |

other

**\*10. What could the college do to support students further and prevent them from leaving?**

## Appendix D

### Withdrawn Student Questionnaire

**Why did you leave college early? Tell us how we can help.**

**\*1. Gender**

Male

Female

**2. Age**

16-18

19-25

26+

**\*3. What course were you studying when you left college early?**

**\*4. Which of the following factors prompted you to leave college?**

	Not a Factor at all	Partly a factor	Mainly a factor
Personal Matters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial Problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Literacy or Numeracy difficulties	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To get a job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family Commitments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pregnancy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of Friends	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quality of Teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Course was not as expected	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Workload	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please specify)	<input type="text"/>		

**\*5. What could the college have done to prevent you from leaving early?**

**Why did you leave college early? Tell us how we can help.**

**\*6. Did you ever discuss leaving college with a tutor or meet with an advisor before leaving?**

- Yes
- No

If so was this useful, please explain your answer

**7. Did anybody from the college contact you after leaving?**

- Yes
- No

Was this helpful

**\*8. Would you return to**

- Yes
- No

If no, why?

**\*9. Do you feel you were given enough support whilst at college, please identify the type of support you required, if any?**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I got the support I needed                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> I needed to be challenged more                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I needed academic support                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> I needed more encouragement and target setting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I needed personal support                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> I needed more support from people at home      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I needed support for an additional learning need (e.g dyslexia) |   |

What else do you feel the college can do if anything to help students stay at college.

**\*10. What you are doing now?**

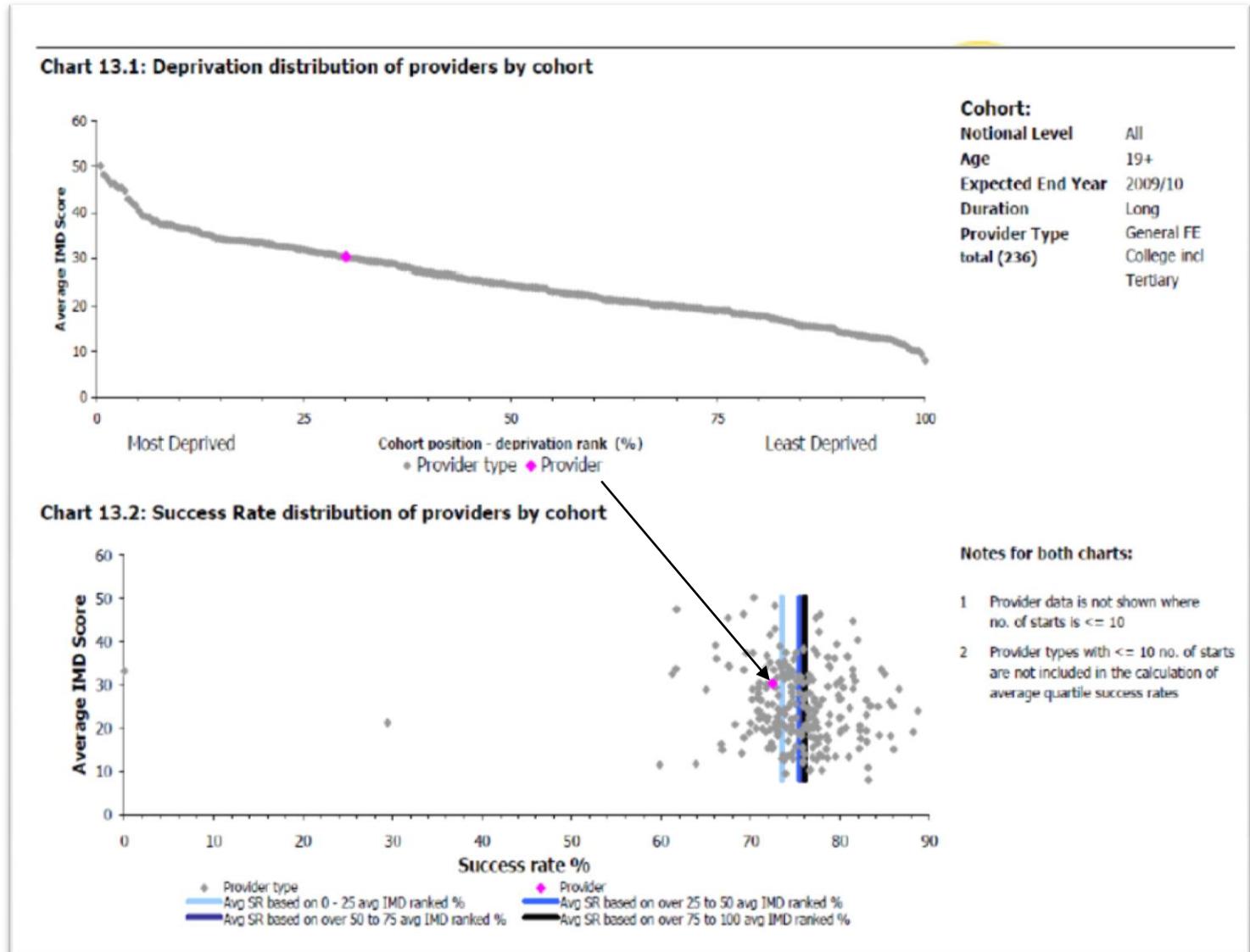
- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working full time           | <input type="checkbox"/> Looking after children at home      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working part time           | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed but looking for work     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Studying at another college | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed and not looking for work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Studying at University      | <input type="checkbox"/> Caring for someone at home          |

Other (please specify)

# Appendix E

## Socio Economic Performance

### Indicator



## Appendix F

### Staff Timetable

	8:30-9am	9-10:30	15 MINS BREAK	10:45-12:15 CLASS	1HR LUNCH	1:15-2:45 CLASS	15 MINS BREAK	3-4pm CLASS	4-5pm
MON		Teaching unit 1		Teaching unit 5		Teaching unit 1		Teaching unit 3	
TUES		Teaching unit2		Teaching unit2		Teaching unit 4		Course Team Staff meeting	
WED				Teaching unit 3		Teaching unit 1			
THURS		Teaching unit 3		Teaching unit5		Teaching unit 1		30 minute Travel to different campus for Team Meeting	Team Meeting
FRI		Teaching unit 4		Teaching unit 5 163		Teaching unit 4		Teaching unit 3	

## Appendix G

### Factors which prompted withdrawn students to leave.

