

## What Works? Student Retention & Success



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### To Strengthen Collaborative Partnerships Between Staff and Students Through the Establishment of a Student Society.

#### Rationale for the Case Study

The BSc Hons Accounting (FT/PT) Course Team, considered the case study of *Nottingham Trent University's* welcome week (Higher Education Academy (2011)), in seeking to further build social capital and support academic and social transitions through its induction programme. The nature of this case study's intervention is "to enhance the social integration of students through the development and academic integration of a Student Society"; the focus of the integration is the overlapping area of the social and academic areas. Prior to the case study's intervention the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics revised its induction programme for new students to the BSc Hons Accounting programmes in 2012/13, to begin pre-enrolment and the format to be a combination of activities both lecture and discussion-led. This programme of activities proved successful in the academic year 2012/13, though the team felt that students should be utilised as not only participants in this induction programme but also collaborators and partners. This conclusion was reached through engagement with a 'reflective checklist', a resource of the What Works? Student Retention & Success (2012). This idea being informed by strategic aim 2 of the Ulster University's learning and teaching strategy (2013/14 – 2017/18) '*To provide transformative, high quality, learning experiences through the promotion of meaningful staff student partnerships that engender a shared responsibility*'. The team felt that this would happen through the Student Society in 'developing the capacity of staff and students to engage' and be developed through the overlapping area of the social and academic spheres in figure 1 of the 'What Works? model of student retention and success', What Works? Student Retention & Success (2012). This case study will demonstrate how students can be trusted, independent partners with both staff and employers.

#### Description/Discussion of the Intervention or Change Initiative and Successful Aspects

Staff, students and key employers, relating to the BSc Hons Accounting full-time and part-time degree programmes, in the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics, Ulster University. Students on the programmes were undergraduate students, first-year to final-year students, and included mature students.

In the pilot phase of the case study (2013 /14), the course team again implemented a sustained, pre-enrolment induction to the BSc Hons Accounting (FT/PT) programmes. To enhance the partnership of staff and students in this endeavour, this was supported through the re-establishment of an 'Accounting, Finance and Economics' Student Society; through events, guest lectures and networking activities throughout the academic year. The Society was re-established and expanded to encourage peer support of student cohorts and to help in the development of professionalism amongst students – and is strongly supported by employers and professional bodies, who expressed a desire to network with students informally in recent years.

In the pilot phase of the intervention, academic year 2013/14, a student Organising Committee and a framework for the 'Accounting, Finance and Economics' Student Society was initiated. Although staff mentors and students initially collaborated, the intention was that the Student Society would be student-led and driven. The development of the Student Society (and committee structure) was informed by the development of other successful Ulster University Societies and models of social integration (Gallagher and Gilmore (2013)), for example, the Marketing Society, the Advertising and Marketing Society at Magee and the Law Society. The Student Committee and staff mentors initially met to develop the framework of the Society and a plan of activities (including collaborating on the induction event, the table quiz). The Student Committee was involved in the pre-enrolment induction day, to then assess how the induction programme could be enhanced in the following academic year 2014/15.

The plan of activities for an academic year includes table quizzes and professional networking events. For the Student Society's initial events staff mentors provided a lot more support in setting-up an event, than for later events. These events provided an opportunity for social networking between students and between staff and students (to help encourage students to see staff as approachable) and to nurture a sense of belonging. Subsequent to the initial table quiz event, as successful, this led to further activities and events. These activities and events included professional networking events held in local employer and professional body offices, activities to raise money for charity and an Annual Student Formal. Local employers and professional bodies, were involved through the provision of guest lectures, networking events and sponsorship. As a result, continued opportunities for social networking and nurturing a sense of belonging were provided; and the encouragement of professional awareness and networking. During the academic year, 2013/14, the Society made a plan of succession for the following academic year, 2014/15, electing a new Committee that were in years one and two of the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics degree programmes.

For the academic year 2014/15, following evaluation of the induction programme and the pilot phase of the intervention, staff engaged with the Student Society to collaborate on and enhance further the induction programme for new students. There was an induction schedule and activities developed through partnership between staff and students. There was delivery of the pre-enrolment induction day; week one induction activities (including a social event) as developed and supported by the Student Society; and follow-up induction activities. The Student Society also developed a Facebook page, encouraging peer-to-peer interaction between new and more senior students on the BSc Hons Accounting (FT/PT) programmes. This social media activity increased the impact of the Student Society on new students and part-time students as well as supporting the Society's events.

One of the main activities, of this What Works? intervention, to create a sense of belonging for the students has been the introduction of an **active** Student Society. The Student Society has been very positive in its development to become an active part of the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics and has become more independent in its operations. Students have taken the lead in its operations, development of activities with now, as the intervention has progressed, minimal involvement of staff.

The Society are building on the work of previous years with a full Organising Committee being elected with many of the students who had a committee role continuing on into key roles within the society providing some continuity/experience and new members introduced to the Organising Committee. The Society's Organising Committee have attended and benefited from Students' Union Training.

There are an increased number of students, full and part-time, at all levels engaged with the Student Society and its social media Facebook page. The Accounting, Finance and Economics Student Society has gained momentum in the Department and is active in Department activities. Their independence, now larger year one membership and active

Facebook page with 250 members are proof of this strengthened activity. The events and activities as outlined took place and were well-attended by students, as well as by staff, to the Student Formal. Additionally, professional awareness amongst students as fostered by the Student Society's employer and networking events has increased. Not only have partnerships between staff and students developed but also between students and local employers developed. This has strengthened professional awareness in students and led to a number of local employer-sponsored events being organised.

On review of activities over the academic year 2013/14, it had been noted that there were very few year one students in attendance at Society events throughout the year. The changeover of the Society's Committee for the academic year 2014/15 provided an opportunity to help encourage engagement between the Society and year one students. Based on further feedback from a subject based 'Free Flow Audit' questionnaire (asking students "what works" and "what doesn't work") conducted at the end of 2013/14 with year one it was revealed that many students were unaware of the events which had been organised. Staff mentors met with incoming year one students to the Student Society's Organising Committee for academic year 2014/15, to ask them about their university experiences to date: how classes in year groups are socialising and interacting and what would encourage year one students to engage with the society through supporting events. It was felt that one way to encourage year one students was to have a Facebook page which would be used to connect students, to promote events and also allow for the sale of used textbooks. Uptake has been excellent with over 250 members of the Facebook group. For the academic year 2014/15, the Student Society's Organising Committee had a stand at fresher's week and attracted 50 year one members. This then developed through semester one with the majority of year one students joining the Society. The Society's Organising Committee also collaborated with staff on, and participated in, the year one induction programme. The Organising Committee members also took the lead in organising a networking event, 'Pizza, Beer and Boost your career', sponsored by Deloitte. A successful Student Formal was also planned by the Society's Organising Committee for the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics' students.

The BSc Hons Accounting (PT) remains an ongoing challenge and the team remain proactive in engaging with these students to encourage a sense of belonging. These students have engaged with activities and through discussion with part-time students there remains challenges with the conflicting demands between study, work and in many cases, family. The case study of the *University of Hull, What Works? Student Retention & Success* (2012), which focused on a mature student's welcome lunch is a planned future activity in relation to the part-time BSc Hons Accounting programme.

### Evidence of Impact

A feedback survey was conducted on the Department's pre-enrolment induction day; this day is a collaboration between staff and the Society. Focus groups with students on the intervention and a subject based 'Free Flow Audit' questionnaire, as well as an analysis of the What Works? Belonging Survey results, were conducted. Year one attrition rates and National Student Survey results were also reviewed for evidence of impact.

Evidence from questionnaires on the pre-enrolment induction activities has demonstrated new students' appreciation of the opportunity to link with Student Society members studying the Accounting subject, as well as other new students to the subject. A number of first-year students commented in the pre-enrolment induction day feedback survey that the strong points of this event was "*Talks with senior students and staff*". These surveys along with staff/student consultative committee meetings also continue to demonstrate positive recognition of opportunities, through the Society's events, for social networking between students and between staff and students. This has provided an opportunity for greater interaction between students and staff in the academic sphere; and greater professional awareness. The activities also encouraged networking and professional awareness; receiving positive feedback from

professional bodies and key graduate employers who support such initiatives. The decline of the year one attrition rate of the BSc Hons Accounting (FT) over the period academic year 2012/13 to semester 1, academic year 2015/16 (*Table 1*) provides an indication of year one students utilising opportunities to discuss, with staff and senior students, on staying enrolled on the programme of study and remaining engaged with their studies (also see discussion on engagement below). The higher rate of 11%, in academic year 2014/15, evidences further students displaying a willingness to discuss decisions on leaving their programme of study, with students making the choice to leave citing that University study was not for them. This conclusion occurred as a result of students being more able to discuss their anxiety on University studies with staff.

**Table 1: Accounting Subject Year One Attrition Rate (2012/13 – 2015/16 (Semester One))**

Subject	Year One Attrition Rate (2012/13)	Year One Attrition Rate (2013/14)	Year One Attrition Rate (2014/15)	Year One Attrition Rate (Semester One, 2015/16)
Accounting	7.5%	4.8%	11%	4.1%

The Student Society has developed well over the academic years 2013/14 and 2014/15 and has involved students from a range of programme areas in the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics and student year groups. It has also helped ensure strong relations with graduate employers and provided an opportunity for students to informally network with recent graduates and employers through its sponsored events. In addition, it has provided an opportunity for students to engage further with staff and feel that they can freely approach staff to discuss topics in relation to their programme at a later date.

Both the Belonging Survey results and the subject based 'Free Flow Audit' questionnaire, have shown the success of the Society activities in helping students to feel engaged and in creating a sense of belonging. In focus groups with students on the programmes, they felt positive on past Student Society events and were interested in attending further events and encouraging others to attend.

The Belonging Survey, over academic years 2013/14 and 2014/15, has indicated that BSc Hons Accounting (FT/PT) students scored similarly to the other Ulster students. For the BSc Hons Accounting (FT) while the belongingness score, for years one and two, is relatively similar to scores for '*Ulster Overall*' and '*All UK Institutions*'; it is slightly lower. Consistent with the Ulster and UK trends year two belongingness decreased from year one from 3.92 on this scale to 3.65. The BSc Hons Accounting (FT) students' engagement score is higher on average than the score for '*Ulster Overall*' and '*All UK Institutions*'. Consistent with an Ulster trend students, it is reported that students are more engaged as their first year progressed and have remained engaged as they progress into year two. Students on the BSc Hons Accounting (FT) while starting with a lower, than '*Ulster Overall*' and '*All UK Institutions*', engagement score at 3.51 in year one, semester one (2013/14) through the What Works? Intervention this has significantly grown to being 4.11 in year two, semester two (2014/15); higher than '*Ulster Overall*' and '*All UK Institutions*'. The BSc Hons Accounting (FT) students have a higher self-confidence on average, than '*Ulster Overall*' and '*All UK Institutions*', in completing their programme successfully. The BSc Hons Accounting (FT) students' self-confidence has grown over the two years of the study from 3.49 in year one, semester one (2013/14) to 3.61 in year two, semester two (2014/15); this end of study figure is higher than '*Ulster Overall*' and '*All UK Institutions*'. Consistent with the Ulster trend the greatest change in self-confidence appeared to be during a student's first year. The trends on these three scales appear to be continuing for the second cohort of BSc Hons Accounting (FT) students involved in this intervention of a Student Society, with a belongingness score of 3.79, engagement score of 4.11 and self-confidence score of 3.65 at in semester two of 2014/15.

The improved higher engagement and self-confidence scores, than ‘*Ulster Overall*’ and ‘*All UK Institutions*’, may be a reflection of the partnership activities between the Student Society, staff and importantly local employers. To do this, as encouraged in the intervention is a Society that is independent of staff in its running, to enable in collaborative activities true partnership between staff and students. This has enabled a more developed sense of engagement with staff and their professional network, which has also encouraged more self-confidence in these cohorts of students. This sense of independence has perhaps impacted on the students’ sense of belongingness. As can be seen in the National Student Survey 2015 results (*Table 2*) and associated qualitative comments, this downward trend on belongingness is not a trend that appears to continue to the final-year of the BSc Hons Accounting (FT) programme:

**Table 2: Accounting Subject Level Results for Ulster University Compared to 2013 and 2012 Results with Sector Comparisons**

Subject (JACS Level 3)	2014/15		2013/14		2012/13	
	% Agree Overall Satisfaction Q22	% above or below sector average for subject	% Agree Overall Satisfaction Q22	% above or below sector average for subject	% Agree Overall Satisfaction Q22	% above or below sector average for subject
Accounting	98%	8% above	90%	1% below	91%	1% above

Final-year students in completion of the National Student Survey in the 2014/15 academic year had been involved in the Student Society both in the 2013/14 and 2014/15 academic years and noted in the qualitative comments of the survey:

*“Just when we were doing careers guidance, it was good to meet the business managers who came in and talked to use about what we were going to face in the future ...”*

*“The University of Ulster is an excellent place to study in perfect methods of teaching, excellent communication resources and support. I feel very comfortable in the walls of my university and can’t believe this is my third and final year.”*

In consideration of the BSc Hons Accounting (PT) over the course of the study the student cohort have shown an increasing level of belongingness from 3.88 to 4.02 and an increasing level of engagement from 3.71 to 4.48. Also shown is a decreasing level of self-confidence from 3.96 to 3.61, a figure in line with the full-time counterparts and still above ‘*Ulster Overall*’ and ‘*All UK Institutions*’. This downward trend in self-confidence may though be a reflection of more appropriate expectations of study-life having been set. While the BSc Hons Accounting (PT) remains challenging for development, due to the often disparate and more mature nature of part-time cohort students, the scores for BSc Hons Accounting (PT) is in part a reflection of the small sample size of seven students. As already noted, a mature student’s welcome lunch is a planned future activity.

There was a feedback survey conducted on the pre-enrolment induction day. The current on-going review of retention and attrition results for each undergraduate programme on a regular basis through the Staff/Student Consultative Committee, Course Committee and School Executive structure (annual subject monitoring process) also was used to evaluate impact of change of the intervention. At the end of each semester, a focus group with full-time and part-

time students (those who have participated and those who have not) was conducted to better understand the role that a student society can play in social integration and inform future planned activities. The continued vibrancy of the Student Society, its strengthening professional networking with local employers and positive National Student Survey results have also provided evidence of the positive impact of the Student Society.

One positive unintended consequence has been the strong student-employer partnerships that have developed through the ongoing work between this active Student Society in obtaining sponsorship and support for Student Society events. This developed from staff team members initially connecting the Student Society to local employers, to the Student Society now developing their own professional network links. The consequences of this has been improved self-confidence in the student cohort as evidenced in the results of the Belonging Survey and will also support graduate employability initiatives.

### Sustainability

The Belonging Survey, 'Free Flow Audit' and subsequent student focus groups have shown areas of focus for the next academic year: further building of staff-student relationships; and further development of a sense of belonging self-confidence for part-time students. The Society's independence has been reflected in their rebranding in academic year 2015/16 to 'Business Student Society', which in itself suggests a confidence in the Society and ambition to develop across the Ulster University Business School. Staff and the Organising Committee of this Student Society, in a commitment to the Student Society's sustainability, have collaborated to develop a Business Student Society Community Impact Award to be awarded in 2016.

### Lesson Learnt

The primary lesson to be learned is that students can be trusted and highly valuable collaborators in partnerships with both staff and employers.

### Reference List

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For full What Works? Student Retention and Success report (2017) see <https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/>