

# A Qualitative Study of Student Retention: The University Academic's Perspective

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**Abstract:**—Student retention continues to be a concern for higher education. Successive Governments have made efforts to incentivise universities however dropout rates continue to increase. Studies have been undertaken on student retention and it appears that there is a combination of reasons as to why student's dropout. This study is of one university in England with a sample size of 75 academics (those employed as lecturers, tutors, instructors and researchers). A qualitative study is undertaken which is part of a funded research project that uses mixed methodology in a systematic, sequential, explanatory and, thematic approach. This article focuses on the findings from thematic analysis. Key themes identified include: engagement, attendance, mental health, workload and family pressure. Findings are presented, and suggestions are made that can be integrated into university policy and practice. The findings suggest that notwithstanding the efforts universities give to retention of students there continues to be and year on year increase in student dropout. This article provides evidence-based suggestions that widens existing literature to help improve student retention and to help inform those undertaking future research in this area.

**Keywords:** retention; university; thematic analysis.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Student retention continues to be a concern for higher education organisations and this has been the case from the 1600's (Berger, Ramirez & Lyon, 2012). There has also been a rise in Government and organizational interest in student retention in the last 10 to 20 years (Dougherty & Callender, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Successive Governments have made efforts to incentivise universities in England that include financial rewards for student completion together with greater focus on improving social mobility of disadvantaged students (Dougherty & Callender, 2018).

Studies are regularly carried out associated with student retention (For example: Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009; Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2002). However, there is increasing evidence to support escalating dropout levels (HESA, 2018; Keohane & Petrie, 2017). It appears seldom that there is a single reason for student deciding to drop out. Reasons for dropout can include a combination of reasons. For example: lack of commitment, lack of social integration, financial pressures, personal circumstances, lack of course match, poor preparation for university life (Jones, 2008).

It is therefore of interest to find out the views and thoughts of academics at university that can help add to existing literature.

This study is undertaken at a university in the UK, outside the greater London area, using mixed methodology—quantitative followed by qualitative. comments that the use

of mixed methods could be described more suitably as multi strategy that can include a two-phase study where quantitative research is undertaken first, followed by qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 1995, 1999, 2013). For purposes of identification university academics are those employed by a University full time/ part time/ hourly paid (sessional) and who may be lecturers/ tutors/ instructors/ researcher.

This study uses a systematic and sequential approach to help answer questions (Creswell, 1995, 2013; Flick, 2011). The first phase that is undertaken is quantitative survey in which all academic members of staff are invited to participate in semi structured interviews. 75 academics respond to the questionnaire. The captured qualitative data, through the questionnaire, are subjected to thematic analysis and 5 semi structured interviews are undertaken to develop further understanding of the initial themes that are developed.

This paper focuses on the qualitative findings of interviews and open questions asked in the questionnaire. Thematic analysis is undertaken that applies findings with themes (Namey, Guest, Thairu & Johnson, 2008). Thematic analysis is a pattern-type analysis within social constructivist epistemology where patterns may emerge identifying themes/ stories across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Braun & Clarke (2008) add that thematic analysis provides a detailed and rich account of data. This study also uses an explanatory approach to the analysis of the qualitative data helping to explain challenges and observed behaviour (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Gratton & Jones, 2010).

## 2. BACKGROUND

Spady (1970) refers to the two approaches to dropout (social and academic). Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) add the term “student persistence” where the university share responsibility in addressing student dropout. Models have been developed building on Spady’s (1970, 1971) undergraduate dropout process model that include: student involvement model (Astin, 1984); Model of student departure (Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985); student retention integrated model (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993); the departure model (Tinto, 1993). Further studies have been undertaken on comparison of theories. For example: Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengstler (2016) examine convergence between student integration model (Tinto, 1993) and the model of student departure (Bean, 1980). Notwithstanding the theory and application that is made, student dropout continues to be a challenge that universities face.

The Office for National statistics (ONS, 2018) advises that there has been an overall trend of increasing number of young students (16- 24 years of age) in full time education from 26.2% in 1992 (when comparable records began) to 43.5% (June 2018). There has been an increasing number of students undertaking an undergraduate degree. In 1930 a total of 9,129 people enrolled (Bolton, 2012). In the academic year 2012/13, for England, there are 1,258,580 students enrolled on an undergraduate first degree. These figures increase year on year. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2018) report that for 2016/17 there are 1,315,745 students enrolled on a first-year degree. Notwithstanding the UK Governments desire to improve retention of first time young students, dropout rates increase from 5.7% (in 2012/13) to 6.3% (in 2014/15) (Keohane & Petrie, 2017).

In 2015/16 dropout from higher education in England rise to 6.4% (HESA, 2018). This increase is also reflected in students from the BME (Black and minority ethnic) group. Keohane & Petrie (2017) add that widening access to those from ethnic minority groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to lead to higher dropout rates. For example, London appears to be the worst area across English regions with nearly 1 in 10 students dropping out in the first year of study. HESA (2018) advises that those who are UK based, BME (Black and minority ethnic) students represent 25% of full time students and 17% of part time students. A further challenge is that students with beliefs and values from non-traditional background are likely to experience different sets of beliefs and values at University (Bryson, 2014). This may help try to explain why dropout is higher in this sector, as all students are encouraged to assimilate themselves with the culture of the university and this includes those from non-traditional backgrounds (Hamshire, Forsyth & Player, 2017).

The UK Government has also changed the way Universities are funded. Most students, in England, are now required to fund their own study (Hamshire, Forsyth & Player, 2017). This can put increased financial stress and pressure on the student while they are trying to cope with new values, beliefs and personal demands that the university espouses. To add to the pressures the students may be away from their home and having to simulate in with people they may have never met in the past.

The Social Market Foundation (SMF, 2016) find no significant improvement in improving retention. Notwithstanding the efforts that universities are giving to addressing the challenges of retention of students, it is apparent that changes need to be made as existing university strategies and policies do not appear to be having the desired effect of reducing the dropout rate and further study is needed to help gain purchase on reversing the trend in dropouts.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses mixed methodology that helps to: contribute to validity, understand the topic in greater depth and, provide more evidence (Albert, Trochelmann, Meyer & Nutter, 2009; Bazeley, 2002; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Gladding, 1984; Hoover & Krishnamurti, 2010). Using mixed methodology can help offset using a single approach (Caruth, 2013). Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003) suggest that there are three approaches to mixed methodology. These are concurrent, conversion and, sequential. A sequential approach is used in this study where the first phase is quantitative and the second is qualitative (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, Plano-Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003).

The questionnaire is undertaken in the autumn of 2017 followed by semi structured interviews (face to face) in early 2018.

The questionnaire includes open questions that allows the participant to provide their own views and thoughts. The semi structured interviews, that are undertaken in phase 2 of this study, allows for flexibility where follow up questions can be asked that can enhance findings and lead to unexpected results (Hair, Celsi, Money, Samouel & Page, 2011). As recommended by Magnusson & Maracek (2015), pilot interviews are first undertaken, and revisions made to the questions, prior to the formal interviews being undertaken.

Qualitative data is used in this study to help contextualize quantitative data, enrich the findings and, to help generate new knowledge (Creswell, Plano-Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003; Mason, 2006; Stange, 2006; Taylor and Trumbull, 2005). Findings from qualitative data

can help reveal information that may not be forthcoming from a questionnaire alone (Seale, 2004).

Thematic analysis is undertaken of findings from the open questions in the questionnaire together with findings from the semi structured interviews, providing depth and greater understanding of the academic’s perspective and allows for themes and ideas to emerge that can then be interpreted (Stone, 1997). Semi structured interviews are used as they fit between a questionnaire (where there is no room to deviate) and an evolving interview (where there are known end points) (Newby, 2014). Open questions provide verbatim comments, allowing the participant to provide an answer in their own words, that in turn can uncover useful information and colour to the write-up (Babbie, 2008; Flowerdew & Martin, 2013; Jonker & Pennink, 2010; Small, 2005)

Braun & Clarke (2008) points out that there is no clear agreement as to the meaning of the term “thematic analysis”. However, thematic analysis can be used with possibly all qualitative methods. It is where patterns emerge within a social constructivist epistemology, from which stories can be told, going beyond surface level. (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2008).

Nvivo (version 11) is used to help visualize data by mapping thoughts and ideas from which themes emerge and discussed. Nvivo also allows for the speeding up of the analysis of data and node creation and helps to avoid information overload (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2005). A scan of the interview transcripts is first made to help identify themes followed by highlighting excerpts of the text in different colors (Bernard, 2013). The interview texts are then read through again and checks made against the themes building on the reliability of the coding helping to make comparisons and to reach conclusions (Gibbs, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

### 3.1 Sample

There are two phases to this study. The first phase is a quantitative in which a questionnaire is undertaken. The sample sizes for each phase is felt to be reasonable.

Purposeful sampling is undertaken that represents the findings from academics. The sample size includes 75 (100%) respondents (N = 75) that includes 63 (84%) full time academics, 6 (8%) part time and 6 (8%) hourly paid. 74 academics provide information about length of service and is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Length of service.

Less than one year	1 year to 5 years.	6 years to 10 years	11 years to 20 years	21 years and over.

1	22	14	25	12
1.35%	29.73%	18.92%	22.78%	16.22%

Phase 2 follows the first phase and includes semi structured interviews of 5 academics (2 males and 3 females).

Participation is voluntary, and the sample is self-selecting where each person has the capacity to make their own decision as to whether or not they wish to participate.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis and evaluation of the findings identifies themes that emerge during the process. The main themes identified in this study are shown in the table below.

Table 2: Main themes.

Number	Theme
1	Engagement
2	Attendance
3	Mental Health
4	Workload
5	Family pressure.

### 4.1 Engagement

One of the themes identified is “engagement”. Tinto, (1993) advises that whereas engagement may occur within the real/ virtual class room social engagement can also occur in other situations and environment that can help student retention. It is therefore interesting to find out the views of participants and their understanding of the term.

Mandy suggests that it is a student who is “sufficiently motivated to want to learn [to] ask questions [and] to do research. “Joan feels that engagement is where the student is “listening, that my words aren’t falling on deaf ears.” Joan points out that the student may not “engage in that moment. It might take them a week or so for them to really think about it, for the idea to get embedded in their minds, and then they perhaps talk about it in the following weeks. So, engagement might not be an immediate thing, it might be more of a long-term thing.” Michael comments that engagement is where students take an “active part within a teaching episode [...] doing the tasks, [...], asking questions, working effectively in group tasks, [...] doing any [...] pre-session tasks.”

### 4.2 Retention, participation and engagement

The term “participation” is also raised as this does appear to give rise to individual interpretation when

compared with “engagement”. It is therefore of interest to delve a little further in to depth as to their understanding of the term.

Academics are asked if there is a link between student participation and retention”. Caroline states that “*there’s a correlation definitely.*” One lecturer comments that this “*is obvious! The students that engage are far more likely to cope better.*” Student development “*comes from within - students need to want to participate otherwise they will not develop properly.*” If students participate in “*learning in general then they will be more engaged and retention will improve, if they are passive then there’s a real risk they don’t understand ‘lecture’ content and therefore a gulf grows between the lecturer and the students can grow till students feel the work is beyond their abilities and choose to leave.*”

Joan suggests that “*maybe it’s a confidence thing but if people are passive in rehearsals it usually means that they’re not doing what they should be doing [...] I work closely, perhaps one to one with them.*” Joan adds that it “*very much depends on what the subject area is; whether you are doing an actual lecture/seminar or whether you’re doing rehearsals or workshops*” The student “*might be shy and they just might not feel confident in speaking out. They would just perhaps rather sit there and take it all in and take notes.*”

Academics are asked if they feel that there is a link between participation and retention and what the terms mean to them. Daniel suggests that participation is “*participating in a group [...], joining in, [...] turning up for sessions.*” When asked as to what engagement meant Daniel asks, “*Is there any difference between engagement and participation?*” He goes on to suggest that “*if you’re in the room and you’re listening and you’re taking notes you’re engaging, are you participating? Participation is going to be interaction with other people whereas engagement is more self-contained.*”

Joan suggests that it “*we should encourage participation because it’s really crucial to what we do here.*” However, it “*depends if you have a really great class discussion. What you don’t want is the hogger, the person that will completely dominates the conversation because it’s important that they understand turn taking. [A]s educators it’s our job to [...] do a little bit of behaviour management [...].*”

Caroline feels that if students participate in “*learning in general then they will be more engaged and retention will improve, if they are passive then there’s a real risk they don’t understand ‘lecture’ content and therefore a gulf grows between the lecturer and the students can grow till students feel the work is beyond their abilities and choose to leave.*”

Joan comments that “*because somebody is passive, [...] doesn’t mean they’re not learning. They’ve got a different way of doing it, why shouldn’t we support that.*” One academic comments that “*many participate in one lecturer’s sessions, but daren’t speak in another’s. The idea that silently taking it all in (or making notes) is in some way deficient, defective, or passive is flawed and nonsensical; equally the notion that students forced to do regular activities are engaged in the learning presumed to be associated with the activity is also nonsense.*” They go on to make a really interesting statement that “*Some so called **passive learners learn well** whilst some so called actively engaged learners learn almost nothing.*”

Daniel provides an interesting example where he “*had one lad who managed to pass his foundation degree without [attending] sessions [...] he did the rest of it himself. [...] so I guess you could call him a passive learner.*” However, Michael feels that a passive learner is a student who is an “*empty vessels sitting in the room waiting to be filled from the font of knowledge standing at the front [...] arguably that’s that doesn’t work.*”

It does appear that the terms passive learner, engagement and participation can be interpreted in different ways. It may therefore be helpful that universities provide a definition of the terms within policies and procedures and the terms embedded into the culture so that there is a common understanding.

#### 4.3 Engagement and workload.

The findings suggest that there is often an overlap of themes. To actively engage with students may require more time and may add to increased workload. This is exemplified by an academic who finds that their “*workload has increased substantially (particularly since the re-structuring) and now covers a range of requirements, of which student support (in various forms) is a part but one that gets insufficient recognition in the workload tariff (and get squeezed by other day-to-day tasks).*” This quote is similar to another academic’s comments who feels that “*very little time or space within my workload to spend the type of intense time outside the classroom to get to know students individually - this only tends to happen with a small handful of students, and usually those who are fully engaged, committed and happy with their studies.*”

One academic feels that more time is needed associated with “*pastoral care*”, and for “*individual sessions and more hours for different extra curriculum activities [...]*” “*staff (including myself sometimes) occasionally get to the point where they’re not able to effectively monitor engagement, and students slip through the cracks.*”

It may be helpful to approach culture at university with a new perspective identifying with the “customer” rather than using the term “student”, by “firmly categorizing the student as a ‘customer’ and looking upon queries and questions as a sign of engagement rather than a habitual annoyance.” This does however contradict another academic who said that “Too much of focus on treating students as customers is going to be detrimental and I can see it in this culture”.

The reframing of university culture is continuous and involves competing demands. For example, one lecturer comments that “I am a program leader as well have having a teaching load. I find that the program leadership takes up a lot of my time, way more than the hours I am allocated. Furthermore, admin support has completely disappeared now which puts added strain on my time. Therefore, the time I have to engage with students, apart from the classroom, is limited.

It may therefore be helpful to revisit the way student’s experience university life. It may require a different approach to delivery of student experience where much greater focus is given to meeting student demands and expectations that includes engagement and participation. This could be built in by bringing in professional services staff to have a much greater integrated front-line role with academics. It may also require a redress of the academic content and delivery to students.

#### 4.4 Attendance

Attendance is a theme that comes out in the analysis and evaluation. Consistency is recommended so that all students and staff members work to the same system and processes and to “have a more consistent approach to attendance issues, extension requests and also to give first years’ time to get used to the demands and standards required of them.”

Daniel suggests that “one thing that would be good is having [an IT attendance monitoring system] actually working because it’s appalling. I keep a paper register and it’s very rare that the [IT attendance monitoring system] actually matches it.” Another academic asks the question as to “why no attendance policy? Why are we always trying to make things easy for students? In doing this we are compromising on academic rigor.”

Subject to a consistent and functional monitoring system, Caroline suggests that “where attendance is low, [...] I think we need to intervene sooner, it’s this fine balance [...] between kinda going they’re adults now it’s up to them let’s not interfere with them but actually picking people up early.” As one academic comments, there “should be tighter controls on attendance and consequences for non-attendance as this impacts on group working, performance of other group members and the motivation levels in the

class.” Another academic feels that it may be helpful if there was a “threat of withdrawal for non-attendance.”

Michael makes an interesting comment that “people talk about attendance and engagement and how they’re not necessarily the same thing ..... but that doesn’t mean they’re engaged or engaging or taking part so maybe by participation...” It may therefore follow that having the same attendance policy for all students could be counterproductive. Passive learners can learn and this does not necessarily correlate with attendance.

#### 4.5 Mental health.

In the academic year 2012/13, for England, there are 1,258,580 students enrolled on an undergraduate first degree. These figures increase year on year (Bolton, 2012; HESA, 2018).

Mental health continues to be challenge that universities face. For example, 31% of young people involved with the Princes Trust report having mental health problems (Prince’s Trust, 2018). The Mental Health Foundation (2018) find that 20% of children and young people experience mental health issues including depression, anxiety and conduct disorder. It suggests that if these figures are reflected in students going to university further resourcing needs to be given to addressing student mental health issues.

Mental health is a theme that comes out in study. Caroline “was really shocked that students with mental health issues [...] have to literally wait and wait and wait for months to be seen. [...] I don’t believe this is unusual.” It does appear that support services are underrepresented. As Daniel explains “better support could be had if we had more staff.” For example, “it’s availability of appointments [...] our counselling service is very good but it’s absolutely overrun with the amount of people”. Caroline adds that there appears to be “inadequate provision in terms of just for the volume of students that are now presenting with mental health [...] challenges and need support”. However, it isn’t just mental health. There also appear to be challenges associated with “learning needs, [...] whether it’s people needing assisted technology, or whether it’s people that [...] that have a learning difficulty that seems to take a horrendously long period of time.”

Joan also feels that the university does not appear to be “quick enough to deal with students with quite serious mental health concerns. [W]e are lecturers. We are not mental health professionals but often we are the ones on the front lines because we see them all the time. Joan adds that “most certainly in the last two years the rise in mental health concerns in our students has absolutely skyrocketed.” Joan adds that she doesn’t know if this is “sector wide or whether this is specific to the area that I teach in but it is something that I have really noticed. And what do we, what do we do?”

*How can we best support that, how can we help them when we are overstretched? That worries me.” Joan suggests that “if all staff were mental health trained at least then we are in a better more empowered position to know how to help our students.*

Joan’s comments are supported by a study of students at a Community College in the USA, that find student counselling can improve student retention (McBride, 2017). The challenge is that there appears to be high demand in counselling at the university in the UK. As explained by Caroline *counselling service is very good but it’s absolutely overrun with the amount of people”*. Caroline adds that there appears to be *“inadequate provision in terms of [...] volume of students that are now presenting with mental health [...] challenges and need support”*

It may be that students are not ready or able to adapt to university culture and the desire for social inclusion may have to be balanced against an acceptance of increased dropout. This suggests that there is an acceptance of the “status quo”.

As explained by one academic *“the typical student at [university name stated] is now different. More mental health issues, more home problems and more criminal behaviour.”* Another academic suggests that professional services staff could also *“Help to publish, promote and provide access to guidelines on academic learning, not just send a link and hope it will be accessed.”* They could also take *“more of the administrative tasks off academics and freeing them up to help students.”* Maybe *“Specialist advisors with appropriate training and/or more up-to-date skill sets could (one imagines) be of more use to students...”* This could include *“mental health, finance, etc. “It may also be helpful to work “more closely with academics.”*

Mental health training can be provided to academic staff. However, they are not trained to be counsellors. That is a specialist role. It may therefore be helpful to review mental health training and support so that all members of staff are more prepared where academic and no-academic staff work more closely with each other in supporting the student. Mental health should be placed central to student engagement and participation and this could help improve student retention.

#### 4.6 Family Pressure

Students may experience challenges associated with family. As Mandy comments *“real life happens [...] Relationships go wrong, people get ill [...] working life; they need to earn money. A lot of students are juggling family, work, and study even supposedly full-time students.”*

Caroline provides another example of a student who *“had some personal issues, she’s lost [...] a family member last year [...] and suffered stress and anxiety, she lost a family member this year, a cousin earlier this year [...] in a violent situation and she’s decided that she’s going to move back to London which is where she came from [...] so that she can have the family support around her. She’s had counselling through her GP [...] she went to student services as well I believe she was signposted again to that. But she’s leaving for personal reasons because she just feels she needs the family [...] unit around her [...] and so I suspect that you know she [...] won’t be coming back.”*

Another responded suggesting that *“they did not think that “every student relates well to every tutor, and if a student is stuck with a student that they don’t like, I think that would not help student retention. Again, I think we need personalization. Why is there an assumption that every lecturer will make a good tutor? Can we not focus on those who are good tutors and enjoy the role, and more importantly, those that students can relate to, and giving them time and space to offer really high-quality tutoring and not assuming everyone should do everything?”*

One academic feels that it would be helpful if professional services staff could *“call [students] to find out why they aren’t engaging”* and to provide *“consistent administrative support for courses as well as IT services which are now very critical for student engagement”* Professional services staff could also *“Help to publish, promote and provide access to guidelines on academic learning, not just send a link and hope it will be accessed.”* They could also take *“more of the administrative tasks off academics and freeing them up to help students.”* Maybe *“Specialist advisors with appropriate training and/or more up-to-date skill sets could (one imagines) be of more use to students...”* This could include *“mental health, finance, etc. “It may also be helpful to work “more closely with academics.”*

It may also be helpful to consider having a radical review of the way undergraduate degrees are delivered, As Joan suggests *“there’s an awful lot to be said for personal conversations [...] However, this appears easier said than done as “the problem is [...] time, we’re just so overstretched because [...] we can’t spare anybody to go and do that sort of thing so my [...] my plan to try and get that kind of engagement is to invite them to us instead.”* It is acknowledged that universities are businesses and that they need to balance income against expenditure. It may therefore be helpful to provide academics and professional services staff financial/ time resourcing directly focused on “student support” allowing for greater engagement with students who are absent and to get to know students better. It may also provide the student much greater personal and social interaction with the tutor and university staff (Tinto, 1993).

If change is to meet with student experience there needs to be “*active engagement in social learning [that is] very much an integral part of the continuing 'culture' within [higher education]. A combination of large lectures, seminars and blended learning technologies serve well in terms of both engaging learners, supporting retention, maximizing staff and resource efficiency, and sustaining the academic reputation of our university.*”

## 5. LIMITATIONS

This study is undertaken on one university in the UK. Studies undertaken elsewhere may lead to different findings. Furthermore, if this study was carried out another time the sample size and responses may be different. There may also be cultural differences and personal biases/ influences.

There are limitations of using thematic analysis as it may not lead to a theory and conclusions may be associated with the obvious (Coolican, 2014). This is not the purpose of this study.

There are no expectations of generalization of the findings. It is felt reasonable that the findings from this study could be expanded so as to apply to a larger sample from which fuzzy generalization could be made (Basse, 1999). However, it is acknowledged that transferability to other organizations may be possible but this needs further investigation and testing. This could then help to add to existing academic literature and to contribute to future research and theory (Basse, 1999; 2001).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Findings suggest that there are increasing numbers of students enrolling on undergraduate courses and at the same time there is an increase in the dropout rate (HESA, 2018; Keohane & Petrie, 2017; ONS, 2018). Widening access to those from ethnic minority groups and disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to lead to higher dropout rates (Keohane & Petrie, 2017). All students are encouraged to assimilate themselves into the university culture that includes students from non-traditional backgrounds (Hamshire, Forsyth & Player, 2017). This may help try to explain why dropout is higher in this sector.

As part of this mixed methodological study, qualitative analysis and evaluation is undertaken from which key themes are identified: engagement, attendance, mental health, workload and family pressure. The sample sizes are made up of 75 academics who participated in the questionnaire and 5 academics who participated in semi structured interviews.

What comes out of the findings from the qualitative analysis and evaluation is that the terms passive learner, engagement and participation can be interpreted in different

ways. It may therefore be helpful that universities provide a definition of the terms within policies and procedures and the terms embedded into the culture so that there is a common understanding. As Joan comments “*because somebody is passive, [...] doesn't mean they're not learning. "Some so called passive learners learn well whilst some so called actively engaged learners learn almost nothing."*

Michael also makes an interesting comment that “*people talk about attendance and engagement and how they're not necessarily the same thing ..... but that doesn't mean they're engaged or engaging or taking part so maybe by participation...*” Having the same attendance policy for all students could be counterproductive as passive learners may learn but does not necessarily correlate with attendance. Therefore, it may be helpful to have a consistent attendance policy that allows for flexibility.

Another interesting finding that comes out from this study is that universities are continually having to balance competing demands-that include balancing income against expenditure. For example, “*admin support has completely disappeared now which puts added strain on my time. Therefore, the time I have to engage with students, apart from the classroom, is limited.*” It may be helpful to revisit the way student's experience university life. It may require a different approach to delivery of student experience where much greater focus is given to meeting student demands and expectations that includes engagement and participation. This could be built in by bringing in professional services staff to have a much greater integrated front-line role with academics. It may also require a redress of the academic content and delivery to students.

A challenge that emerges from the study is the apparent increasing demands on resourcing associated with mental health. Counselling is a specialist area and should be maintained as such. However, to help support student's mental health training could be given to all members of staff with the purpose of informing them of what to look out for. Mental health should be placed central to student engagement and participation and this could help improve student retention.

Students have to cope with family pressure at the same time as having to face to challenges of studying at university and possibly living away from home. If change is to meet with student experience there needs to be “*active engagement in social learning [that is] very much an integral part of the continuing 'culture' within [higher education]. Academics and professional services staff could be given financial/ time resourcing directly focused on "student support" allowing for greater engagement with students who are absent and to get to know students better. It may also provide the student much greater personal and*

social interaction with the tutor and university staff (Tinto, 1993).

This study provides a little more information to support research in this area.

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