

# Retention: The Persistent Debate

Nicola McIntosh

**“Should these students have been admitted to college in the first place?”**

**“Does...withdrawal reflect upon the curriculum or the methods of teaching?”**

Looking at our education landscape, we can quickly discover that improving student retention is critical and the topic of widespread discussion and debate. The above quotes might echo voices heard in colleges and universities in 2020. They are, however, quotes from a study published in 1937, demonstrating not only the length of the debate but also its complex nature – if there were a straightforward answer, we would no longer be asking these questions.

The last few years have seen Scottish Further Education (FE) colleges go through substantial structural and operational changes. The core message driving the reforms (commonly referred to as ‘regionalisation of Scottish FE’, introduced in 2012) was that the sector had to be more transparent in terms of role, identity and accountability (O’Donnell and Murphy, 2018). Regionalisation has certainly overturned previous structural and governance arrangements, dividing the Scottish FE landscape into 13 regions and merging colleges to create fewer, larger regional colleges. The reforms have introduced new educational imperatives (commonly referred to as regional outcome agreements), funding structures and accountability arrangements. Regionalisation has also renewed the emphasis on the learner journey within the Scottish college sector.

During this period, college populations changed in profile, with fewer students overall, but high proportions of students in the 16-19 age group. As the success rates of this age group are reportedly lower than other age groups, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) points out that colleges now face a demographic that has changed and is less likely to succeed (Education Scotland, 2014). Indeed, statistics reported by the SFC suggest withdrawal among this age group is consistently higher than for those aged 25 and over (Scottish Funding Council, 2019). While students themselves may not be aware of or concerned with the subject of retention, the pressure on staff to ensure their students persist increases the complexity of an already demanding job.

For over 80 years, academics have debated withdrawal from education, primarily focusing on reasons for withdrawal, problems associated with withdrawal, and models attempting to define and explain the phenomenon (see McNeely, 1937; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975 and 1999; Bean, 1979; Bean & Eaton, 2000). An increase in publications over the 1970s and 80s brought with it a focus on causes and solutions

(Ice et al., 2011). The literature has, in general, attempted to answer what we have come to class as typical retention questions – ‘why do students withdraw?’ and ‘how can we stop students withdrawing?’ Such questions often lead to a focus on institutional practices and interventions (Martinez, 2001). We see the complexity of conceptualising and measuring retention in educational policies and academic studies around the globe, with uncertainty over what to measure and how to measure it. Whether researchers can ever find a model to explain the phenomenon remains to be seen, as the vast body of literature continues to grow and demonstrate the complex nature of the subject and the individuals involved (Mckendry et al., 2014; Gairín et al., 2014).

It has become evident over the eight decades of published work that there is no single approach to understanding student withdrawal or the persistence demonstrated by those who do not withdraw. Instead, research continues to adapt previous approaches, combine theory from a range of disciplines, and produce new and valuable insight into student retention. While research has shifted between psychological, sociological and organisational approaches, there is now an increasing need to combine them. The research to date has identified relevant aspects of each approach, but studies of students’ lived experiences of persistence are significantly lacking. We cannot separate individuals and their attributes from the social world in which they live. Nor can we separate them from the organisational structures of which they are part. There remain, however, relatively few published studies which seek to understand students’ experiences of persistence within their social and organisational structures.

While some studies have focused on sociological aspects of retention, often looking at student integration and satisfaction, others have retained a focus on psychological concepts, attempting to understand individuals’ attributes that make them more susceptible to difficulty in college and, therefore, withdrawal. Many researchers have focused on what organisations themselves can do, initiating interventions to support students through their studies. However, despite such initiatives, some claiming to have reduced withdrawal rates by up to 10% (Thomas, 2012), withdrawal remains high. A common factor among many research studies relating to retention and persistence is their focus on these psychological, sociological or organisational factors, through their theoretical underpinnings or methodologies. While there is a move to combine theories to examine links between them and their impact on persistence, many remain focussed on single approaches which, looked at differently, could offer integrative perspectives. Our imposition of labels such as psychological, sociological and organisational may help us make sense of a complex world; in turn, it may help develop our thinking about retention and persistence. However, remaining focussed on these labels as disconnected factors could be limiting the effects of our research. In other words, such labels push us toward specific research themes.

The lack of research relating to the lived experience of students, either withdrawing or persisting, means we have little understanding of how our students experience college. Without this understanding, significant progress will continue to be unattainable. Moreover, the lived experience of students considering withdrawal is impacted upon by psychological, sociological and organisational factors, and a greater understanding of the overlapping of these areas and their effects on individuals' experiences will be necessary for the future of academic persistence research. The argument here is that more research is needed on mapping and exploring the lived experience of students, and FE offers a rich field of study.

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