The importance of ‘doubting’ on student retention: Findings from the HERE Project

Retention, Progression and Success in Higher Education Conference
Thursday 7 February 15.30-16.30

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Agenda

- The HERE Project
- Some Key Findings (10 mins)

- Timeline exercise (30 mins)
  - Pressure points and crises throughout the first year
  - Interventions to support doubters

- The HERE Project toolkit and discussion (20 mins)

The HERE Project

NTU

The HERE Project

Two strands

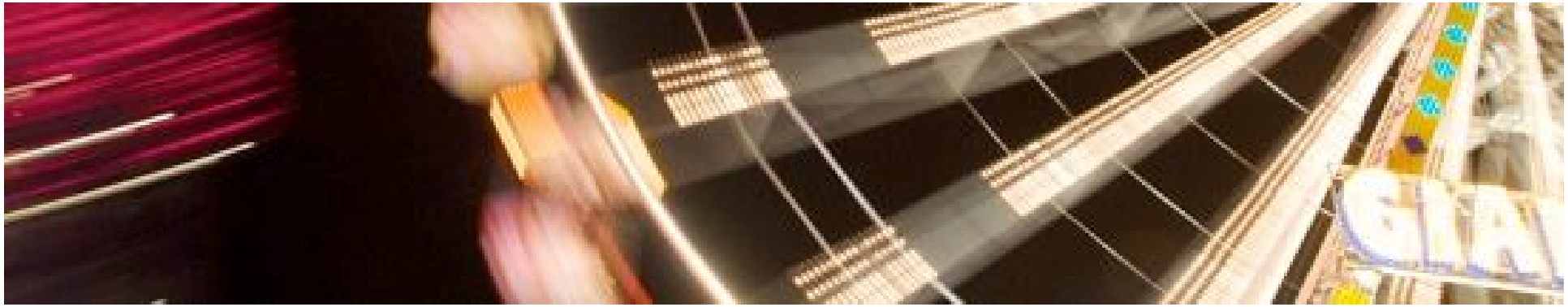
1. Experience of student doubters (considered withdrawing)
2. What do programmes do to support retention in first year?

- How many students are doubters in the literature?
  - 21% Rickinson and Rutherford (1995) – 39% Sodexo (2010)
  - Yorke & Longden (2008) – 25% (rising to 40% if less informed about course)
- Doubting as a cause of withdrawal
  - Gradual accumulation of doubts - Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998)
- But UK progression is good
  - NAO (2007) suggests that progression to yr 2 is approx 90%
  - Our work is therefore also about engagement

Methodology

- **Strand 1**
  - Doubters experience difference from non doubters?
  - Consider factors that reduce leaving *and* increase staying
  - Findings led to programme survey questions

- **Strand 2**
  - Appreciative enquiry approach - what works?
  - Case study questions
  - Survey of students on same programme



The HERE Project toolkit

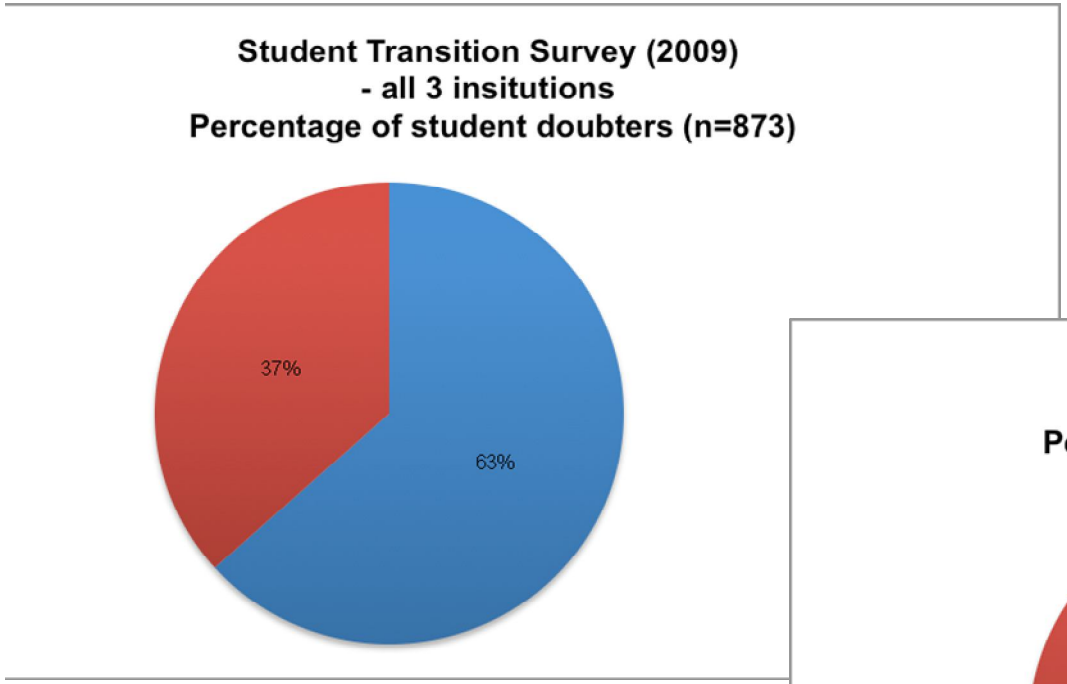
- 9 recommendations to improve retention and engagement

- Broadly around two themes
  - Reducing doubting in the first place
  - Supporting doubters

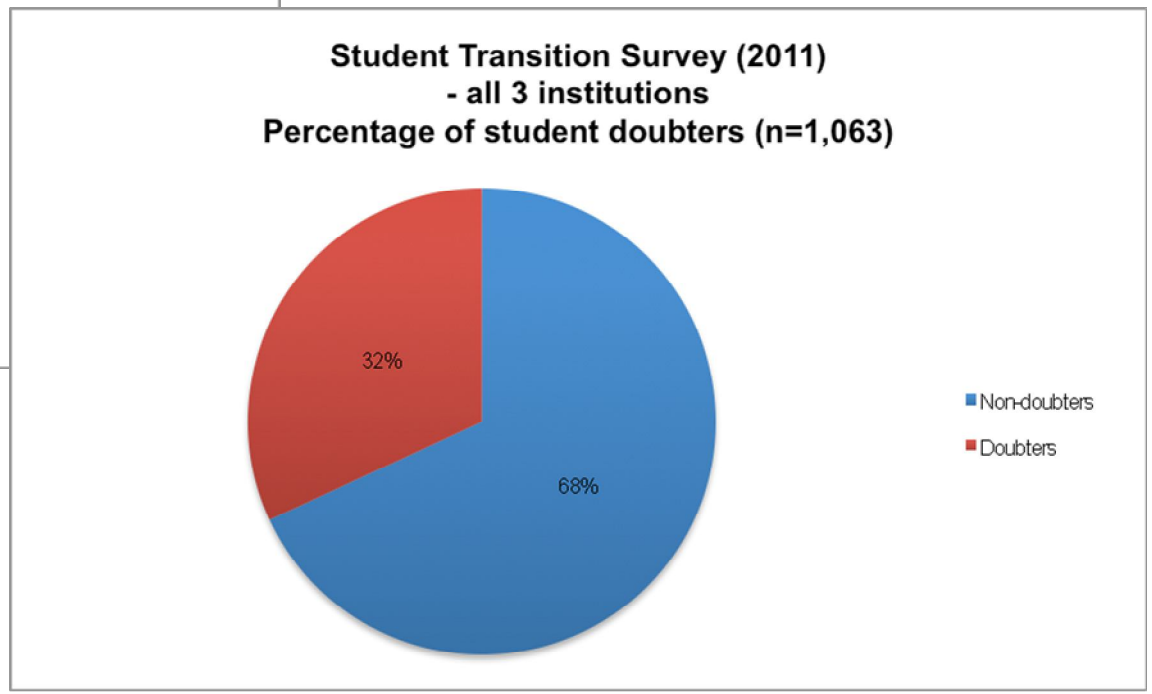
- Each with suggested actions
- Diagnosis comes as part of the theme
- Suggest teams implement strategies that work for them

Some Key Findings

Approximately one third of first year students have experienced doubts sufficiently strong to make them consider withdrawing at some point during the first year.



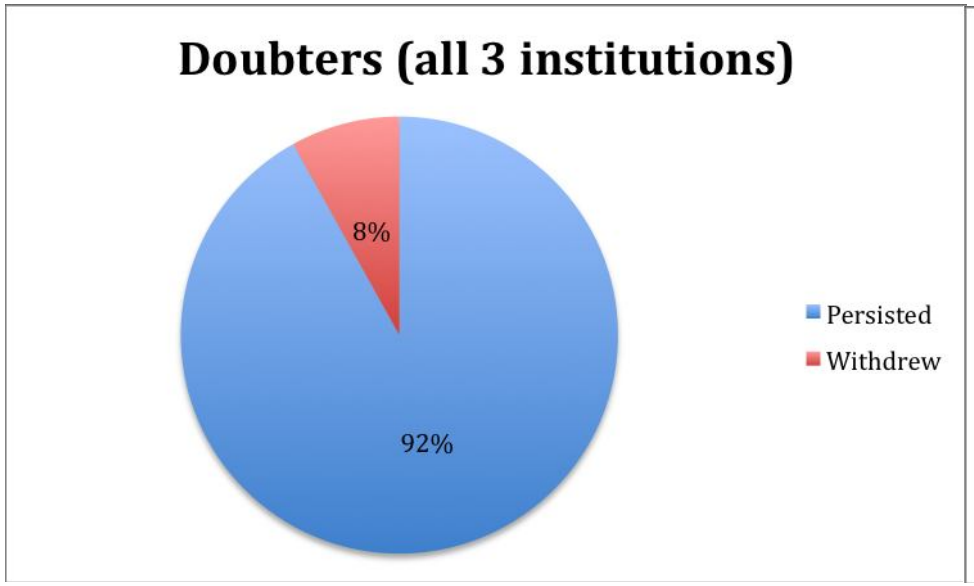
"Doubters"
"Non-doubters"

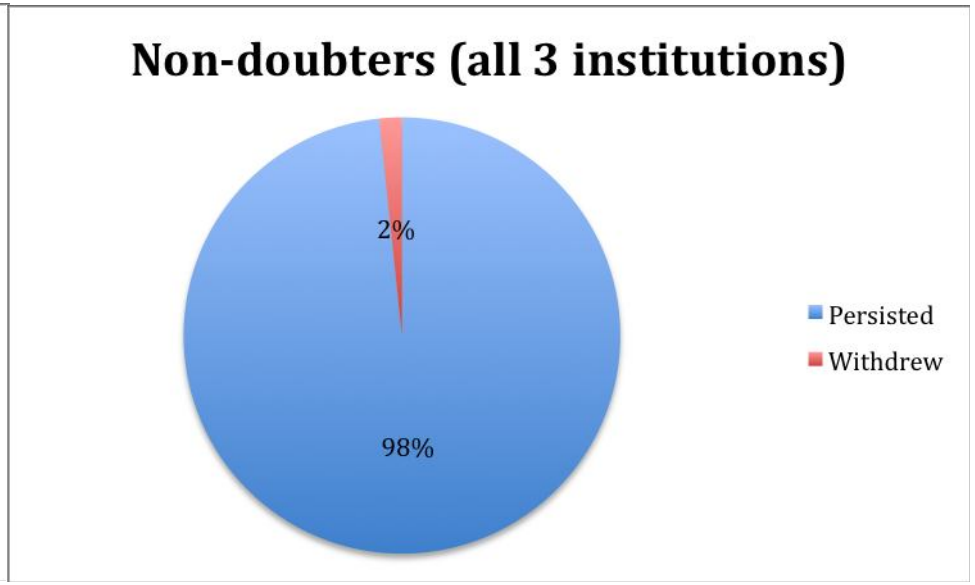


Doubters are more likely to leave than non-doubters

- 483 students granted us permission to monitor their persistence
  - 182 doubters
  - 301 non-doubters
    - Tested Dec 2009 - Overall progression better than institutional benchmarks

- Implications
  - Links to other UK research & supports Ozga & Sukhnandan's (1998) model
    - Withdrawal not due to a sudden shock





Doubters reported a poorer quality experience

- Measured 17 student experience factors
- For example *'my subject is interesting'*

- Tested both the importance and actual experience of a factor
  - In most instances importance was higher than the actual experience
  - Exceptions – social, peer & family support

- Average gap for non-doubters = 12%
- Average gap for doubters = 29%

Quality of Experience (continued)

- Doubters reported:
  - Less likely to understand the differences between FE & HE
  - Less likely to have had difference explained
  - Less likely to find pre-arrival course accurate

  - Finding course less enjoyable
  - Fewer friends
  - Less likely to feel that they belonged
  - Studies harder to cope with
    - At UoB scored lower grades
  - Feeling less confident to ask for help

"I don't seem very involved with the University to be honest … probably if I see my tutor on the road he wouldn't recognise me".

- Overall gave an impression of being far less well engaged with their peers, their course and their university

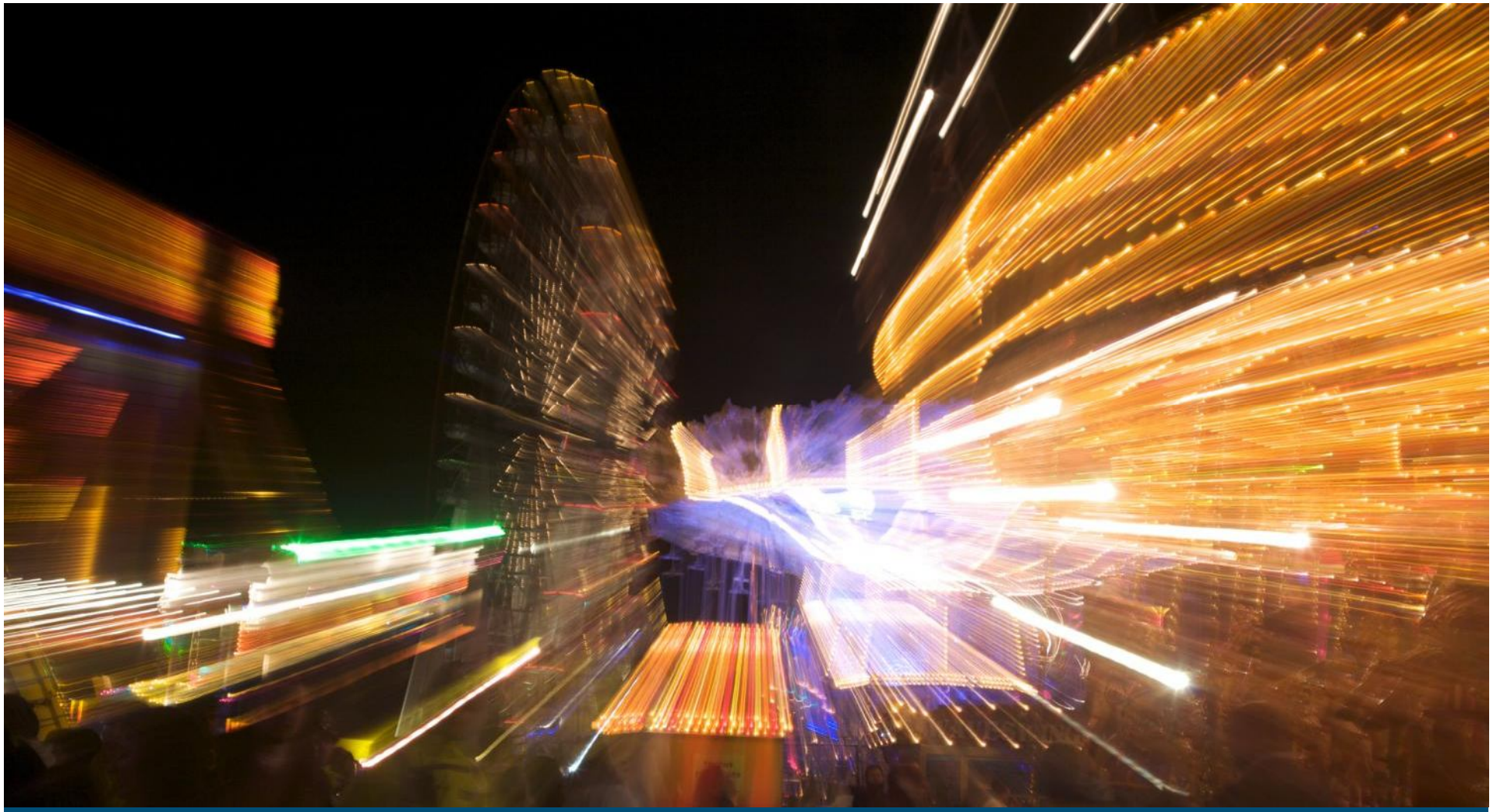
- Evidence about UCAS tariff was inconclusive

There were four main reasons cited by doubters for staying

- ‘Support from friends and family’
- ‘Adapting to course/ university’
- ‘Determination/ internal factors’
- ‘Future goals/ employment’

- **Impact of friends & family = undervalued by students**
- In 2009, open question
  - Friends & family most important (particularly friends made at university)

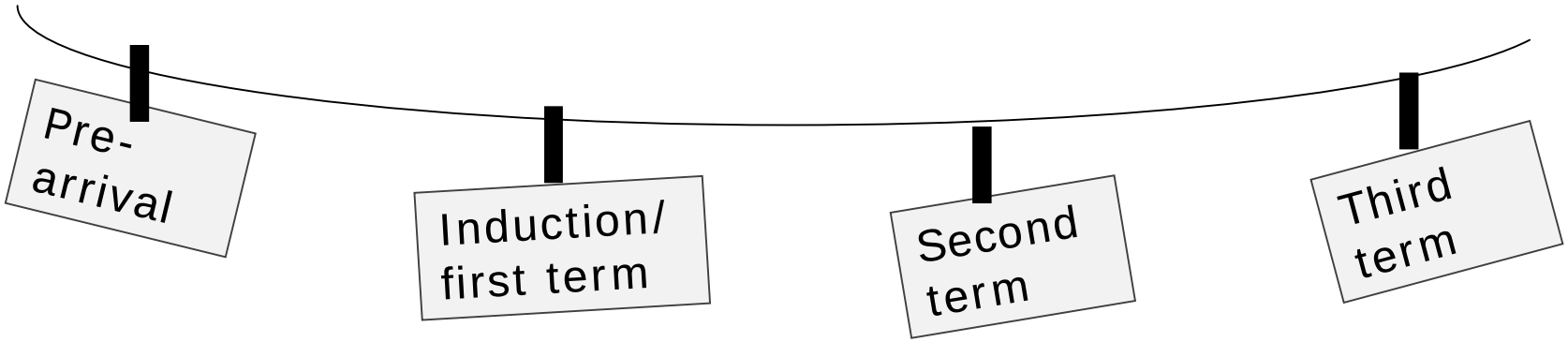
- In 2011, when asked to choose from options
  - Personal determination
  - Future goals & employment
  - Then friends & family



Timeline Activity

Timeline activity

Working in teams/tables make a timeline by hanging cue cards to the string across the room



Problems/ crisis points	Solutions/ interventions

Toolkit & Discussion

Toolkit

- Series of recommendations & actions
- Written guide
- Recipe cards

- Designed to be used by course teams in meetings/ staff development

–www.HEREproject.org.uk

HERE Project Recommendations

- Identify & respond to students at risk
- Transition to HE
- Relationships & communications with staff
- Choosing the right course
- Improve social integration
- Sense of belonging
- Student motivation & goals
- Active engagement
- Good communications & access to student support

Thank you very much for your time