University of Leicester

GENIE
Genetics Education Networking for Innovation and Excellence

# “Belonging and Identity” as a means to promote retention and involve students

Annette Cashmore

# Belonging

‘Belongingness’ hypothesis:

‘*…human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships*’. (Baumeister and Leary, 1995)

# Methodology

- Combination of quantitative and qualitative methods
- 1st Year Survey and 3rd Year Survey across three departments
- Follow-up interviews
- Early Withdrawal Survey of University leavers 2007-08 and 2008-09
- Video diaries (Biological Sciences students)

# Key themes

- Personal tutors and other staff relationships
- Departmental culture and curriculum methods
- Managing expectations
- Central services
- Social spaces
- Clubs and societies

# University working groups

- Personal Tutor Working Group
- Student / Staff Committees Working Group
- Space Working Group
- Feedback and Assessment Working Group
- Mentoring Working Group

# Student / Staff Partnerships

- Personal tutors Project
- Development and expansion of the Course Rep. programme
- Employability skills in the curriculum
- Teaching partnership awards for students

# Student Experience Project

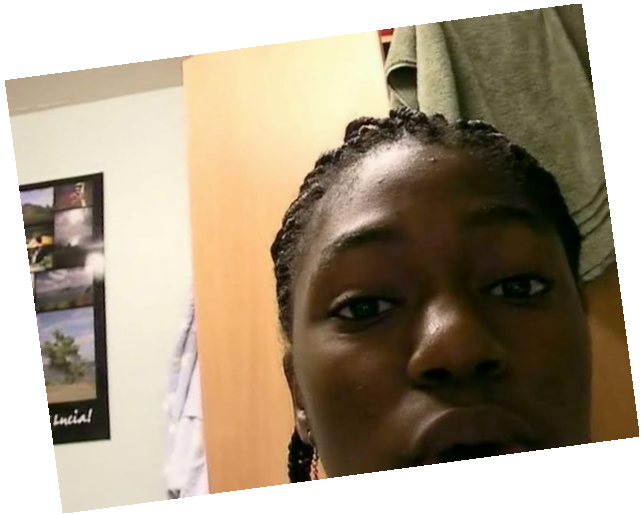
## Aims

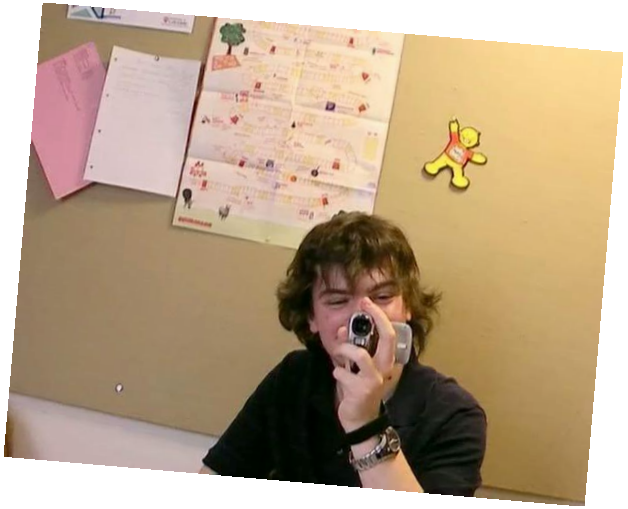
- To find out what matters to students throughout their HE experience and beyond.
- Indicators of change

# Student Experience Project

- Cohorts of bioscience undergraduates
- One month before start
- Use of small, hand-held video cameras
- Now in third year
- Weekly 5 minute videos
- Focus groups

# The Student Voice





"It's really cool that we can actually send in these videos and it's like us being heard 'cos first years at university are normally never listened too"

# The student voice

- *The perspective of students.*
- Transcends managerial or ‘top-down’ approach to identifying areas for change
- Feed research into studies of many areas

# Fragmented transitions

- Students are continually adjusting and *re*-adjusting to the transition from home to university.
- During the first semester students occupy an ambiguous ‘middle space’ between home and university

# Friendships and social transitions

- Central to student transition
- Students establish friendships in varied ways
- Some students build supportive friendships within weeks
- Some may struggle to ‘fit in’
- Other concerns of ‘fitting in’ – i.e. alcohol
- Pressures of friendships.

# Friendships and social transitions

- Bioscience students: different hours/routines

*video*

# Christmas holidays

- End of 1st semester – students exhausted
- Look forward to ‘the comforts’ of home
- Need to ‘re-adjust’ to family ties again
- Soon fall back into ‘dependent’ relations with family and close friends

# Home and revision

- An emotional need to distinguish between home and university.
- Impending assessed examinations at beginning of 2nd semester.
- Students struggle to create working space in symbolic space of home.
- Compromises ability to revise for exams.

*video*

# Re-adjusting to life at university

- Students ‘step up’ revision when they return to campus.
- Complicates their ability to, as Sam put it: *‘hold onto the relationships that I’d left Uni with in December.’*
- Again, particular issue for Bioscience students; Sam had 5 exams, her friends had 2 exams.

*video*

# Heaven knows they're miserable after Christmas

A video diary project offering insights into students' feelings could help to cut drop-out rates

Louise Tickle

For first-year undergraduates, it seems, even being back in the bosom of their family for Christmas doesn't offer blessed relief from the stresses and strains of being a student in the 21st century.

A three-year longitudinal study being carried out at Leicester University into the way students experience their time in higher education has shown that post-Christmas blues hit hard when people land back at university for the start of their second term.

The findings come from an analysis of two years of video diaries compiled by 40 undergraduates at Leicester University: the students were asked to talk to their video cameras about anything in their university life that mattered to them. The subjects of the research were otherwise entirely undirected, a point that Professor Annette Cashmore, director of the university's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Genetics, says is critical to the usefulness of the data being collected.

Exam stress can build up in the second term Photograph: Don McPhee

## No instruction

"There are a lot of video diary projects being done, but I'm not sure they tell you much more than what you're guiding the subjects to talk about," she says. "We gave first years a video camera, but then no other instruction except that we wanted at least five minutes of footage a week about anything that was important to them."

continues, her team has been surprised by the spike in anxiety levels that was caused by going home over Christmas and then returning for the first weeks of the spring term.

"There were some really heartfelt videos that discussed things we hadn't really

going back to a life she'd moved on from.

"Once home, it was hard getting back into the relationship with her boyfriend. And then when she arrived back at university, it was difficult, she said, to get back into friendships there because they hadn't been made for very long."

break with her family because of concern about exams. "I knew there were six as soon as I got back in January, but I also wanted to go home and have fun," she remembers.

"So I went home, but then didn't do any revision. At that point I was quite worried. It meant I had to cut short the time with my family to go back to uni a week early to revise."

Akeredolu says her anxiety levels mounted as term kicked in and her exams loomed. She also points out that first years are having to deal with living without their familiar support structures at a time of stress, and new friendships can't yet be relied on in the same way.

"For the first few weeks of that second term back, I don't think I was really settled into uni. You've only just made your friends, and they're not deep friendships yet," she explains.

A briskly unsympathetic view might well be that any individual will certainly have to deal with more traumatic things in their life than this, so perhaps students should buckle down and stop searching for stuff to whinge about. At a practical level, however, says Cashmore, a central point of the study is to find out what prompts students to drop out of university and how best to support them so they don't.

Dropping out is expensive and demoralising for students; neither is it great for a university's reputation. Leicester's drop-out rate is below average at 6.1%, but given that 35,000 students a year in England don't complete their degree course, it's understandable that HE managers want to find ways of helping undergraduates to weather the pressures that arise during their course.

"For many, university is a wonderful experience, but for some there can be times of loneliness, isolation and doubts

or were considering leaving. Asked reasons for withdrawing, a third said didn't enjoy university life, while on cited debt as an issue.

While universities may assume anyone who has successfully negot their first year will manage fine in thei ond and third, Cashmore says that a video diary study has gone on, it's bec apparent that students have to const adjust and readjust to changing socia academic demands throughout thei versity career. Recurring themes i diaries included worries over set into new accommodation, coping new personal relationships and ada to new styles of teaching and learnin

## Advice by podcast

In recognition of these findings, Leic is now putting in place support struct to help students at strategic points as move through their course. Podcasts advice for freshers on subjects suc how to enjoy their initial weeks at how to cope with post-Christmas e stress and what to expect as the pres ramps up at the start of their second have been created by some of the sec years who are participating in the vi diary research.

The university is also considering m ing its first set of first-year exams so students aren't hit with tests while ba yet recovered from their new year ha over.

"When students first come to uni, th are lots of things put on to support th such as mentoring and meeting with sonal tutors, but it's not just in Octo that it's needed, it's needed in Janu too," says Cashmore. "It's not about m lycoddling the students - it's about rec nising the stressful elements that do oc in doing a degree."

# What are we doing in relation to transitions ?

- Re-visit timing of exams
- Student-produced podcasts to prepare students before they come to university - to help first years
- Student podcasts from second year students for first years
- Student mentoring throughout

# Student – staff collaboration

- 15 students
- 7 academic staff
- 4 staff from Students' Union

# Training

- research planning
- questionnaire design
- focus groups
- data analysis

# Methodology

- Questionnaires

  - 1997 responses from students

  - 292 responses from academic staff

- Collated and analysed using coding frame and Excel

- Focus groups with staff and students

# Results

- Existing guidelines adequate
- Data reinforced that there are inconsistencies across University

## Recommendation – New Code of Practice

- Student personal support
- Tutor to have detailed knowledge of course
- At least one meeting per term
- Number of tutees / tutor kept to a minimum (30 max)
- Training for staff
- Feedback and monitoring
- Information publicised to staff and students

Research Group - students & staff

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Training

↓

Research

↓

New Policy

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Accepted by University