

A review of student exit interview processes

Final Report January 2008

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Acknowledgements

- We gratefully acknowledge the financial support from the Widening Access Fund and the support from our mentor Debra Ibbotson (Widening Participation Manager at the University of Surrey)
- Thanks to Mike O'Driscoll (CRNME) for the work on setting up the SPSS files, assisting in analysing, as well as producing the graphs and tables for chapter 4.
- To our Advisory group for their support and guidance:

Graham Fice	Deputy Registrar
Debra Ibbotson	Widening Participation Manager
Nuri Pansari	Head of Programmes: Professional Preparation (Division of Health and Social Care) (DHSC)
Margaret Volante	Head of Practice Learning and Education (DHSC)
Maire Woolven	Head of External Affairs (DHSC)
- Thanks to Jeff Biggs and Sara Gould from DHSC for helping us to understand the processes around students leaving as well as the relating administration and documentation.
- Thanks to Claire White and Penny Robinson for transcribing the interviews.
- Pam Smith for comments on the manuscript.

Chapter 1 Introduction

This report outlines the methods and findings from the research project 'A review of exit interview processes', which was undertaken by the Centre for Research in Nursing and Midwifery Education (CRNME) at the University of Surrey between August 2006 and September 2007. The focus of this project has been on the process of exit interviews and how the information generated from the exit interviews is being utilised by the Division of Health and Social Care (DHSC), as well as other units at the University of Surrey to inform its policy and procedures on student recruitment, retention and success. A multi-method approach was used to map out the processes involved as well as the ways in which reasons given by students for leaving have been categorised.

The Division of Health and Social Care provides education, training and professional development for individuals working in health and health related fields. Evidence suggests that in recent years the demographic characteristics of nursing and midwifery students entering Higher Education has changed. 'Non-traditional' students have been given opportunities to enter nursing through new entry pathways. However, the impact of these changes has not been systematically evaluated (Kevern et al, 1999). For example, a study by Archer et al (2002) suggests that students entering HE with 'non-traditional' entry qualifications might feel marked out or labelled and this could potentially make failure more likely.

The CRNME recently completed a study called 'Widening Participation: Supporting student nurses from diverse backgrounds' (Magnusson et al, 2007). This project helped to illuminate so called non-traditional nursing students' experiences of University life, what their needs of support were and how universities can develop educational activities to support a diverse student population progress and succeed. Findings from interviews with tutors revealed gaps in the exit interview process. Tutors conduct exit interviews with students who are leaving the programmes. Claims were made that the categorisation of leaving reasons did not necessarily reflect students' complex reasons for dropping out of programmes. Another finding suggested that the data produced from the exit interviews were not being shared among tutors or used to strategically inform strategies on retention and progression. The average attrition rate from nurse training in England lies around 18 % (Department of Health, 2004). The cumulative rates for the individual programmes within the Division of Health and Social Care range from 17% up to 30% attrition at the end of programmes.

Widening participation (WP) has informed the rationale and design for this project . However, in order to improve retention rates it is imperative to better understand the key factors and reasons why nursing students (from all backgrounds) are leaving the programmes in such high numbers. The role of the exit interview and the data produced is crucial in this process. Against this backdrop the following project aims and objectives were developed:

- Investigate best practice for under-graduate student exit interviews to provide robust data that can both inform retention strategies and to contribute to an understanding of academic persistence.

The project objectives were to:

1. Scope student exit process across UniS Schools including the production and the use of data from these processes.
2. Review health related programme literature on the use of student exit interview tools.
3. Review reliability and validity of exit interview process and tool used within the DHSC.
4. Develop appropriate exit interview tool and training package to support production of quality exit interview data.

Report overview

Chapter 1 introduces the rationale for this project, as well as listing the aims and objectives. Chapter 2 expands further on some of the key policy and research literature in relation to widening participation, attrition and student exit interviews. Chapter 3 describes the project design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the scoping exercise, documentary analysis and interviews with tutors and students that have left the programmes. Chapter 5 includes the discussion and conclusion and places these in the context of relevant research and policy literature. Finally, Chapter 6 provides recommendations on how the DHSC can strengthen the student exit process as well as giving 'good practice' recommendations for the whole of the University of Surrey.

Chapter 2 Background

Introduction

This section summarises key policy and research literature in relation to widening participation, attrition and exit processes.

Widening participation

Widening participation has been high on the UK Government's agenda during the last decade, and the key aim is to involve 50% of all 18-30 year olds in Higher Education by the year 2010 (DfES, 2003). Students that have previously been under represented in higher education (often referred to as 'non-traditional' students) are being targeted. These students tend to belong to one or more of the following groups:

1. Mature students (over 21)
2. First in family to attend higher education
3. From lower socio-economic groups
4. Living in so called 'low participation neighbourhoods'
5. Having non-traditional entry qualifications
6. Ethnic minorities
7. Having special needs

(Government White Paper 'The future of higher education 2003)

Attrition studies

Houltram (1996) predicted relationship between age, mode of entry and outcomes at the end of the common foundation programme (CFP). Similarly, Kevern et al (1999) investigated the relationship between nursing student characteristics and academic achievement and found the highest proportion of students withdrawing had entered with either Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC) or through Access courses. Highest CFP completion rates came from students with at least 2 A-levels. The authors claimed that nursing offers 'added value' for non-traditional students and linked this to work which has considered organisational factors of attrition. They also stressed the importance of nurse lecturers' pastoral role as a retention strategy. Further work was called for in relation to the roles of nurse lecturers working with non-traditional students.

Action on Access (2003) investigated six UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which performed well in widening participation and retention and attempted to identify factors that had contributed to that success. Significant factors that improved the success of non-traditional students included:

- HEI climate being supportive and friendly (for example sustained commitment to student experience, sense of 'belonging')
- Emphasis on support and formative assessment early on in programme
- Recognising importance of social dimensions
- Recognising that the pattern of student engagement in HE was changing (increasing part-time work by students, role of personal tutor)

Further factors that appeared to affect retention included HEIs not making maximum use of student data (i.e. demographic links to withdrawal). Another key barrier was described as the level of commitment of all University staff both to the philosophy of WP and to supporting the success of students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, according to policy, HEIs did not tag or label WP students and this made it difficult to analyse effectiveness of new WP policies.

In addition, the research and policy literature covering WP, attrition and exit-interviews provides the following evidence:

- Exit interview data may not reflect the true reasons why students are leaving the courses. Reasons are complex and difficult to quantify (Pearce, 2004).
- There is variable evidence whether non-traditional students are more likely to withdraw from University education compared to other students. For example Ozga and Sukhnandan (1997) found that students from lower socio-economic groups were more likely to withdraw from University, mainly due to financial reasons. However 23 'case studies' carried out by Universities UK (2002) where relevant HE personnel were interviewed, revealed the view that widening participation student retention rates were the same as for their 'peers'. Statistical evidence was however limited.
- Another research project used innovative exit-interview processes with the aim to minimise student nurse attrition. It was found that the new exit interview process greatly improved the quality of information collected (Glossop, 2002).
- The move of nurse education into Universities in the early nineties was hoping to reduce attrition rates (UKCC, 1986).
- Making maximum use of available student data, such as demographics and other statistics on reasons for attrition, will have a positive impact on student retention (Action on Access, 2003).

Chapter 3 Project design and methodology

For this project we chose a mixed method approach, applying both quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve the project aims and it comprised of four phases. The first phase involved the formation of an Advisory Group and seeking approval from the University Ethics Committee. During the second phase, we undertook a literature review and conducted a scoping exercise across University Schools to identify current practices and use of student exit interviews. In the third phase, we mapped the process and structure of the Division of Health and Social Care (formerly EIHMS) exit interviews, which including these key elements:

- 1) Documentary analysis of samples of exit interview forms (to include investigation of current categorisation/coding of reasons for leaving). All exit interview forms completed during the previous 2 academic years were reviewed and analysed using thematic content analysis. Documentary analysis of 166 documents were undertaken (excluded – students who left because of academic failure). This enabled the research team to understand the process in which categorisation was undertaken.
- 2) Face to face interviews with key members of staff (N=6) who conduct exit interviews to investigate how current exit interviews were carried out, and identify the structure in place.
- 3) Telephone interviews with students (N=13) (who left their programme in the past year) were conducted.

Our original intention was to undertake some non-participant observation of a random sample of up to ten exit interviews. The purpose of the observation sessions was intending to capture the content and format of the exit interview. However, following the analysis of our interview data and upon consultation with the Advisory Group, it was agreed that it would not be meaningful to observe the exit interviews since the tutors in the interviews had indicated that the discussions with students about leaving, generally occurred before they reached this point. The actual exit interview was viewed predominantly as an administrative procedure.

As per our project proforma, a fourth phase was planned to include a revised exit interview tool and its introduction through staff training workshops. However, the initial findings of our project indicated that this would be premature given the re-structuring of the University and emergence of faculties from the former set-up of schools across the University that was taking place.

Data collection tools

a) Interview schedule for staff

There were five key areas of questions with prompts for each area:

1. Experience and expectations of exit interviews - How long have you been involved in conducting exit interviews? What do you think is the purpose of exit interviews? What expectations do you have? How important are they?
2. Training needs – Do you need training?
3. Communications – Tell me more about the procedures and processes involved. What changes could be made to improve lines of communication?
4. Categorisation – How sufficient are the reasons on the current form? How do you ask the student to verify the category? How do you distinguish between primary and secondary reasons? How is the open ended answers used by the school?
5. Dealing with exit interview data – What normally happens after an exit interview? What happens to the exit interview form? How is the exit interview data used within the school?

b) Scoping across schools

Key areas for investigation included the following:

1. Does your school offer/conduct exit interview for students who are leaving the programmes?
2. Who normally conducts the interview?
3. Do you use a particular form/questionnaire?
4. Tell me more about the procedures involved in the exit interview?
(probe – how do you categorise reasons for leaving, e.g. financial, family etc.)
What happens with the information that you collect from the students (explore who else receives the information, e.g. registry etc, tutors)
5. Are there any changes you would like to make in relation to the exit interview process? (probe: generally do you think the current systems works well, if so, why? If not, explore why not)

c) Telephone interviews with students

The following areas were discussed with the students during the telephone interview:

1. First of all, I would like to know how long ago it was when you left EIHMS?
2. Did you have an exit interview with someone from EIHMS?
3. How would you describe that experience?
4. What reasons did you give about leaving EIHMS?

5. Do you have anything else to add that would help us in understanding your experience so far?
6. May I ask what type of work or study have you embarked on since you left?

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University of Surrey Ethics Committee. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the project in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Participants were given information leaflets prior to the interview. They were invited to ask the researcher questions prior to participating and were given the opportunity to withdraw at any point including withdrawing their contribution subsequent to the interview. All participants gave both verbal and/or written consent.

Sample

Participants in this project constituted a purposive, convenience sample.

1. Interviews with staff (n=6)
2. Documentary analysis (n= 166)
3. Telephone interviews with students who left (n=13)

Data analysis

With our interview transcripts, qualitative data analysis consists of systematic consideration of the data in order to identify themes and concepts (Fielding and Thomas, 2001).

An external clerical assistant transcribed the audio-taped interviews verbatim. In quotations the symbol '....' indicates material edited out to preserve confidentiality, [] indicates explanatory material included, block letters indicate interviewers' questions. The researchers systematically analysed the data; broad emerging themes were identified before subsequent coding. Thematically similar segments of text both within and between interviews were then identified. Consideration was given to the internal consistency of responses, the frequency and extensiveness of participants' responses and also the specificity of responses.

Participants quotes are used to illustrate data findings, the quotes which have been used are representative of general discussion unless noted not to be.

Data analysis – Descriptive and inferential statistics

The statistical software package SPSS (v13) was used to produce descriptive and inferential statistics. Chi square was used to test whether seasonal variation in reason for leaving the programme was significant. Chi square test showed no statistically significant relationships between quarter of academic year and primary reason for leaving.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	45.528 ^a	36	.133
Likelihood Ratio	49.744	36	.063
Linear-by-Linear Association	.000	1	.991
N of Valid Cases	166		

a. 41 cells (78.8%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .18.

Strengths and limitations

We have achieved the core aim of this project namely to: Investigate best practice for under-graduate student exit interviews to provide robust data that can both inform retention strategies and contribute to understanding of academic persistence.

The project objectives were to:

1. Scope student exit process across the eight UniS Schools including the production and the use of data from these processes.
2. Review health related programme literature on the use of student exit interview tools and why students stay (academic persistence).
3. Review reliability and validity of EIHMS exit interview process and tool.
4. Develop appropriate exit interview tool and training package to support production of quality exit interview data.

Chapter 4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

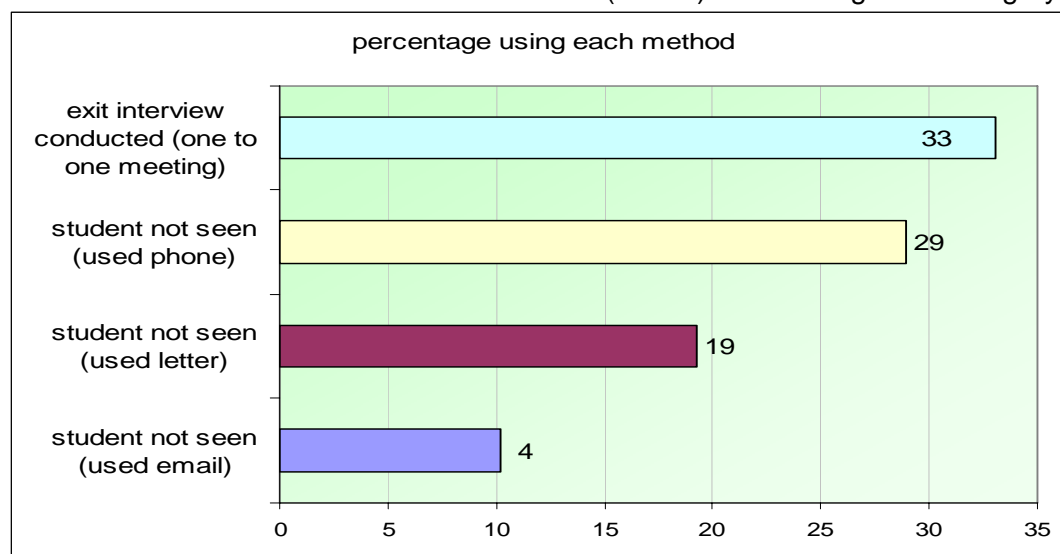
This chapter outlines the findings from phase one to three of this project:

- Documentary analysis of exit interview forms
- Scoping interviews with schools across University of Surrey
- Interviews with staff from Division of Health and Social Care
- Telephone interviews with students

4.2 Documentary analysis of exit interview forms

Documentary analysis of samples of exit interview forms (to include investigation of current categorisation/coding of reasons for leaving) was undertaken. All exit interview forms completed during the previous 2 academic years (September 2004-September 2006) were reviewed and analysed. This enabled an understanding of the process in which categorisation is undertaken. The first chart below shows how the exit interview was conducted. In a third of cases the student was seen for a one to one meeting. In 29% the discussion with the student was held over the telephone and in the remaining letter or email was used.

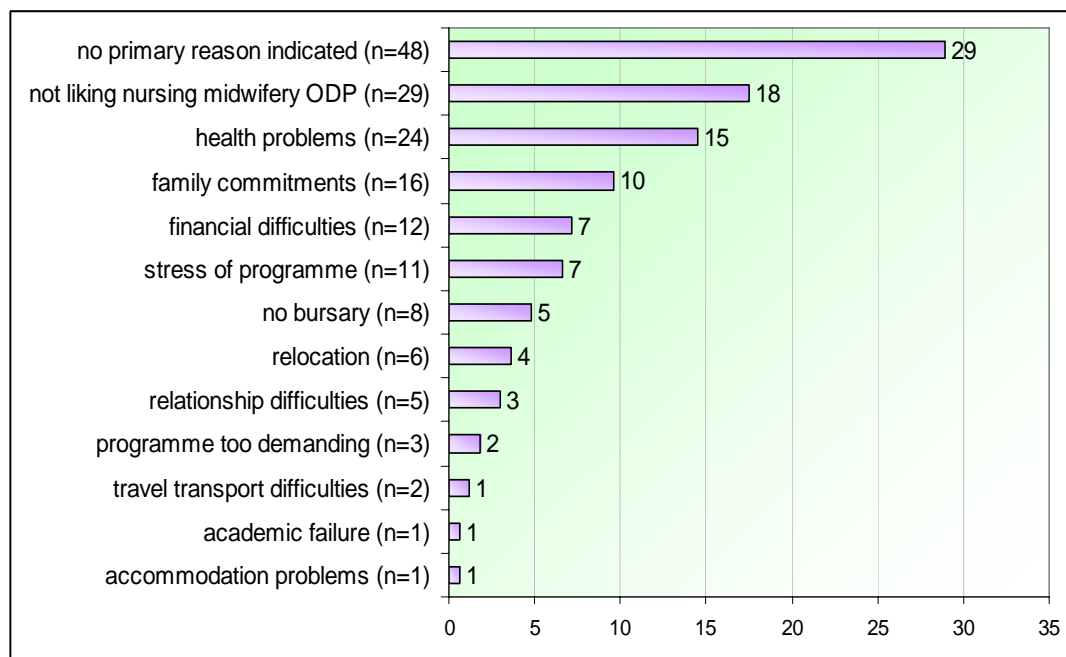
Chart 1 Method used to conduct exit interview (n=166) % choosing each category.



As the tutors complete the exit interview form they tick a 'primary reason', which categorises why the student left the programme. Chart 2 (next page) shows that in just under 30% of the exit interviews no category was chosen. Instead, an open comments field has been used. Otherwise, the three prime categories for leaving were as follows:

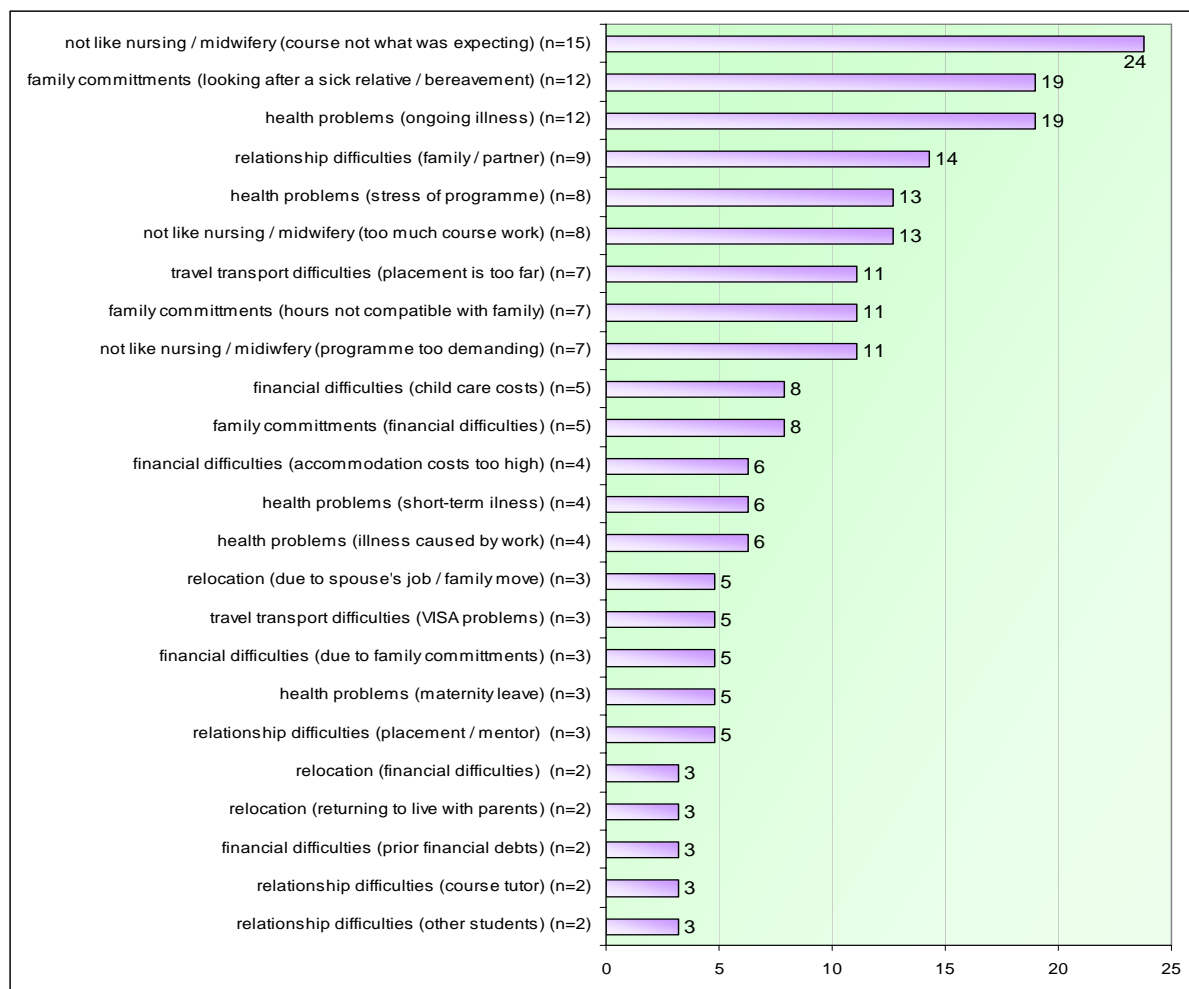
- Not liking subject 18%
- Health problems 15%
- Family commitments 10%

Chart 2: Percentage of respondents citing each primary reason for leaving programme n=166 N for each category shown in brackets. Single choice question (responses total 100)



In addition to completing primary reason the exit interview tutors also completes 'secondary reason'. Chart 3 (next page) outlines the responses to this section of the form. Again, this mirrors the results from the previous chart with 'not liking nursing', 'health problems' and family commitments having most responses. However, interpreting this chart is more complex, secondary reason was not completed for all students who left and for many students more than one category was used.

Chart 3: Percentage of respondents citing each secondary reason for leaving programme n=63 N for each category shown in brackets. Multiple choice question (responses do not total 100)



Seasonal variations in primary reasons for leaving programme

In order to investigate whether primary reasons for leaving the programme varied by time of year, the dates on which students left the programme were divided into four 'quarters' (Q1 September to November; Q2 December to February; Q3 March to May; Q4 June to August).

Analysis showed that there was some variation in primary reasons for leaving the programme according to time of year but small samples mean that any apparent differences must be interpreted with caution and there were no statistically significant differences. Table 1 (next page) shows the three most frequent reasons for leaving the programme in each of the four quarters. In a high proportion of cases (29%) no primary reason for leaving programme was indicated. Overall, the most frequent cited

primary reason for leaving the programme was 'not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP' (18%); health problems (15%) and family commitments (10%). 'not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP' tended to be the primary reason for leaving earlier in the academic year (quarters 1 and 2); health problems were the primary reason for leaving in Q3 and family commitments was the primary reason for leaving in Q4.

Table 1 Most frequent primary reasons

	Most frequent primary reason for leaving programme	Second most frequent primary reason for leaving programme	Third most frequent primary reason for leaving programme	Proportion of cases leaving where no primary reason is indicated	Total number of students leaving (n)
Q1 Sep - Nov	Not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP (13%)	Financial difficulties (10%)	Health problems (10%)	40%	30
Q2 Dec to Feb	Not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP (28%)	Health problems (12%)	Stress of programme (11%)	16%	57
Q3 Mar to May	Health problems (18%)	Not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP (10%)	Financial difficulties (10%)	31%	49
Q4 June to Aug	Family commitments (23%)	Not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP (13%)	Health problems (17%)	40%	30
All quarters	Not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP (18%)	Health problems (15%)	Family commitments (10%)	29%	166

Possible relationships between time of year and primary reasons for leaving might be further examined by producing meta-categories from the primary reasons for leaving (i.e. producing a smaller number of categories) and / or using comparable data from previous years if available.

Table 2 Primary reason for leaving programme by quarter

	accommodation problems	not liking nursing / midwifery / ODP	family commitments	relationship difficulties	financial difficulties	health problems	stress of programme	academic failure	travel / transport difficulties	relocation	programme too demanding	no bursary	not ticked	total (responses do not total 100 due to rounding)
q1 (sep to nov)	0	13	7	7	10	10	0	3	0	3	0	7	40	100
q2 (dec to feb)	0	28	9	2	5	12	11	0	2	4	4	9	16	102
q3 (mar to may)	2	10	4	4	10	18	8	0	2	6	2	2	31	99
q4 (june to aug)	0	13	23	0	3	17	3	0	0	0	0	0	40	99
total	1	18	10	3	7	15	7	0	1	4	2	5	29	102

4.3 Scoping interviews with schools across University of Surrey

To locate the practices within the Division of Health and Social Care in the wider context of the University of Surrey, a scoping exercise of current practices and use of exit-interviews across all Divisions and Faculties (previously schools) was carried out. In total, seven telephone interviews (including one via email) with staff were conducted.

Key findings that emerged are as follows:

- All informants indicated that no formal exit interview is in place for students who decide to leave. However, a number of approaches to dealing with student who wish to leave the programme were described, such as:
- Using 'informal chats' that were not recorded.
- Students are directed to their personal tutor or course directors for discussion.
- Students withdraw via email.
- Completing a form for Registry.
- Personal tutors or programme directors are generally the staff who deal with students who are thinking of leaving.
- It appears that no other schools utilises a form (except the leaving form for registry) or questionnaire/ check list when students leave.
- Views about current systems in place: most perceived that their existing system appears to be working well, although a couple felt there is opportunities to improve the system. It was suggested that formalising the system and processes might be the way forward. It was also suggested that the role and responsibilities of the Programme Director could include overseeing exit processes.

4.4 Findings: Interviews with staff from Division of Health and Social Care

All staff members who had the designated role to conduct exit interviews were invited to participate in face to face interview with one of the researchers. Only one member declined and six participated.

The interview was semi-structured, and designed to cover a range of themes and topics gathered from the literature review. An interview guide was used and all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Respondents were also asked to describe their experience of conducting the exit interview with students who were leaving the programme. On average, interviews lasted up to an hour.

The findings are presented. Each quotation is followed by a unique participant reference to maintain anonymity. The key themes which focus around the questions asked in the interview are:

- Role of the exit-interview
- Exit form and its purpose including values
- Categorising leaving reasons
- Role of the personal tutor/staff development issues
- Examples of good and bad practice

a) The Role of the Exit Interview

We explored with staff what they perceived were the reasons for conducting exit interviews with students. Many appreciated the importance of the exit interview and saw it as a channel at which both tutor and students can have a dialogue and have an opportunity to clarify with the students their reasons for leaving. The role of the exit interview has been grouped according to the two themes below.

Closing the lid

The exit interview is perceived as a process in which the student's journey in the chosen programme comes to an end. This journey is likened to closing the lid and offering the student 'closure'.

I think It [exit interview] closes the lid. So that works well in the sense that you can't necessarily remember all the people that need to be told that this student has left. So although we'll have the odd one that will slip through the net, I think we've really tightened that process up and the actual form and interview process allows that end point to happen (Tutor 1, p. 2)

I know you've mentioned a few things now, why we are doing the exit interviews, so what would you see as the main purpose?

In a sense I think it's got a very important role in terms of closure for the student and sometimes it can be where you've got an opportunity to explore issues with the student, although I think that's usually gone on before that point. So it's the communication really, so the student knows exactly what's happening, as do we, so we can alert the various agencies. (Tutor 5, p1)

Clarification and administration

This sub-theme reflects tutors' view that the exit interview offers them an opportunity to seek clarification from the student about their reasons for leaving. It is seen as an administrative activity.

In my mind it's [exit interview] to really clarify for us and for the students the reasons or the interrupt of leaving and to see if we can support the students in any way, because we don't want them to leave, we invest heavily in these students and we don't want them to leave, so I think we need to make sure that they are really sure about leaving and they really, is there no possible way we could support them, there's no possible way of making them work longer shifts to make up the hours in practice or do extra study days etc, but usually they are already, have already made up their mind, or we can't keep them on the programme because they're academically not suitable or they're not coping with the programme, not suitable, because they should be suitable from our selection process but not coping with the course for some reason.. (Tutor 3, p1)

Oh, I would say incredibly important, because they've got to be helping us identify what are stresses in the student's life; and not just the exit interviews, but also the interrupt interviews.

[Researcher] Yes, of course.

I think both of those are important, because that will help with our recruitment and our retention, and our programme planning, and our staff development.

(Tutor 1, p4)

To a certain extent, exit forms are what we are required to do to ensure smooth administration really. So the exit form is a conduit for alerting placements and exams, residences, that someone is leaving ... So in that sense it's very important, but it's a little bit mechanical and the real effort goes in before that point. So, for instance, we might have, certainly pre-exit interview meetings with people. So, for instance, quite often I get students tell me they're thinking of leaving and I will see them, but I won't go armed with an exit form usually. I will try and unpack what is lying under their request. (Tutor 5, p. 1)

b) The Exit Interview Process

From the tutors' perspective, the exit interview process is usually long drawn and is more than just a paper exercise. Others considered the exit interview process as using the exit interview form to 'capture' reasons for leaving.

Fragmented long-drawn process

“Well the process you see is a lot more than just filling out the form. There’s usually quite a lot of dialogue that goes on between me and the student, or the tutor and the student, or me and the personal tutor, there’s a lot of two-ing and fro-ing and emails going back and forth and conversations” (Tutor 4. p. 1)

Capturing leaving reasons

We also explored the use of the exit interview form and how useful it was to have primary and secondary reasons. Some tutors shared their strategy in working through the form during the exit interview. They also highlighted some of the difficulties experienced, for example:

What we try to do is capture it on these things, these sub headings, and then there is opportunity to comment further so I guess, as far as the actual, the essence of the reason why they have chosen to go is captured here. What isn’t captured is the lead up to it, but the conversations that go on, the initial difficulties, how do the students alert somebody to the fact that they’ve got a problem. (Tutor 4, p.2)

I suppose there’s always going to be problems how you calculate the reasons for leaving because I guess one of the huge problems with exit forms is that people pretty much never leave for one reason ... and sometimes maybe you have to go with your best guess as to the main reason or encourage the student to tell you what the main reason is. So their reason may not actually be any that are listed. (Tutor 5, p.3)

And I probably could have forced her, but it would have been artificial if I had forced her down to just one choice, and in my mind it was right to tick them all, if that’s how she felt. The form shouldn’t be forcing you to make an artificial choice ... You risk simplifying it and I think we’ve got to be very careful that we don’t simplify a very complicated journey that the student’s been through. I’ve got to tell you, as a Personal Tutor, the number of hours I spend writing notes after individual meetings with students, recording the notes in the student’s files, which is time well spent. To spend a length of time getting the dates, the content of the meetings onto yet another form. (Tutor 6, p. 7)

c) Role of the Personal Tutor

The role of the Personal Tutor is perceived as an important role, particularly in supporting students especially those who were experiencing difficulties;

So I think that the Personal Tutor is really key to supporting students in this type of situation. So it's how we make that much stronger, and for the vast majority of students life is fairly OK, isn't it? But it's those ones who have the real difficulty, and she may have come to you. She could easily have been a student who jumped before she was pushed, if you like, and said 'I've got too much going on, family difficulties, I need to leave' and how would I have got that information out of her. (Tutor 1, p. 3)

And I think the role of Personal Tutor needs to be taken extremely seriously ... and it worries me too, that some people have it very low down on their list of priorities, reply emailing to students who are distressed; and that worries me enormously, and it's a matter of just picking up those individual Personal Tutors and reminding them of the importance of the role. (Tutor 6, p4)

Well I think the Personal Tutor role needs to be really firmed up, as to how the student needs to use the Personal Tutor. I've had quite a number of discussions with people who run Personal Tutor workshops, but I think that the Personal Tutor needs to be clear, the individual, and then we need to convey that to the students, much more so. We've done a lot of work on that over the last couple of years, but I still think there's a long way to go on it. (Tutor 1, p3)

d) Leaving statistics

Currently, existing data on exit interview forms are processed through various channels, namely, a) an administrator responsible for producing monthly data on student leavers and interrupters, b) finance personnel who collect the information, code the data and send it to registry, and c) Registry collates the data received and codes them.

I don't think as a Personal Tutor you necessarily know how many we're losing from the School, when you think about it.(Tutor 1, p11)

Do you know how this information and data is used within our school or within the university?

No I don't really. Well I know, obviously I see a letter from [name of administrator] that's sent out to the student and I know she stops the bursary

and she lets placements know and presumably accommodation as well, so, but no – I don't know after that really.

And I'm thinking specifically about the reasons why they left, do you know how that is used?

No I don't, that would help in filling it in more fully if I guess, I knew what was happening with that... Well, looking at the number of students who are leaving for a particular reason would be useful so you know, if students are leaving because of travel or transport difficulties that sort of thing, having an idea of the number of students that are leaving and why they are leaving would be useful thing to know about. " (Tutor 2, p5)

From my perspective, what I do is I will give this to the admin person, and she then processes it and if she's got any queries will come back to me. If it's an interrupt then we have a follow-up, dates that we will put in there so that she's got reminders of when students need to be contacted; and if there are any comments that I've got that relate to the student needs to be seen before rejoining and not just a simple rejoin, then I'll make comments on that.

And do you know what happens to it after it's been to her?

No, I've got no idea, and certainly not with the exit interviews. I just assumed that that data could then be collected in terms of retention, but I've no idea.(Tutor 1, p. 10)

I have never heard any statistics coming back. Nobody's ever fed back to me... Well, I've been working here for [x] years. I mean, you hear that attrition rates are high and every once in a while at a locality team meeting you're given the latest numbers that have left ... You do all the work and you hear nothing afterwards. And you know, the number that we're successful with too, as far as I'm aware, I don't think there are any stats on that. (Tutor 6, p8)

Would you like to see it?

I think it would be really quite useful. What would be useful with that information is firstly about numbers, but also about ...

What do you mean?

How many are leaving and if there are particular times of the year that they're leaving, so that you can look at the curriculum to see whether there's something in the programme that's having an impact on why they're leaving, and what can we do about that. Also, the reasons why they're leaving, because that may help us in our interview and selection process. (Tutor 1, p10)

Although most tutors considered how helpful it would be to have access on some of the statistics on student exit, one was cautious in view of the potential cohort differences while another questioned the value of knowing the 'trend' since they had adequate concerns about their own branch specific issues:

To be absolutely honest with you I'd probably look at those statistics and think "Yes, well, it might be different next year" because each group of students are different. (Tutor 6, p10)

e) Training issues

As only a designated number of teaching staff are identified as key people to conduct student exit interview, we were interested to know what training they had had and identify issues for future staff development. In general, tutors reported being self-taught or shadowing someone who has had extensive experience.

Have you had any training in doing exit interviews?

No.

Is there a need for it do you think?

There's only certain people that can do these interviews, these exit interviews.

(Tutor 4, p2)

We explored the need for more systematic training in doing exit interviews and some have identified the potential usefulness of having a workshop.

Do you think there should be kind of more systematic training?

Possibly, yes. I think in an ideal world we ought to have ... it's the cross branch stuff, so that everybody in the same discipline and in different disciplines are doing the same thing, really.

It might be that you could actually do a workshop, between yourselves here and just talk through it.

Oh yes, absolutely. I think there would be some mileage in that really

(Tutor 1, p5)

f) Examples of Good Practice

From our interview data, we were able to glean examples of good practice in exit interviews. We had reports of how well exit interviews were conducted, where creating an environment, managing a particular issue or good liaison with Personal Tutors can help the process. Below we have identified a few examples to demonstrate the different processes that occur.

Example 1: Managing a particular issue

If they say yes that they would and they've really enjoyed the aspects of nursing, then you think 'Right, we've got to try and manage this particular issue here now' rather than, if they're saying to you 'I really hate nursing. It's not what I thought. I really don't want to do it. I'm terrified of it.' Then you've got 'OK, wrong expectations' and what I try to do is talk about the future. What are they going to do in the future? So for some of those younger ones it might be that they want to come back to nursing, but they just feel that they're too young to do it now. I think that that's fair enough really. (Tutor 1, p3)

Example 2: Giving time

I think things like the timing is really important that you've given the student an opportunity to think before you actually fill this form in, so I would always want to have a sort of informal chat with them to see if there's anything else that's easily resolved. So for example, I had a student who came to see me a couple of weeks ago who had had a really bad time on the ward and was convinced she wanted to finish the course and go home and she was really obviously exhausted, tired, so sat and chatted to her for about 2 hours I should think and I said 'I don't want you to make any decisions now, I need you to go home and have a rest and talk to your mum and dad', and I've since heard she decided to stay on the programme. (Tutor 2, p1)

Example 3: Liaison with Personal Tutor

Well I would have chatted with the personal tutor beforehand as well to get some background information I think. Probably would look at their placements and do I need to let placements know straightaway or ring their placement, even myself maybe, it depends on the situation, the last one I did that was thinking of an interrupt I think I rang the placement straightaway so that they knew, but I think that's about all. (Tutor 2, p5)

Example 4: Creating a supportive atmosphere

I would see my role as very much about the support we can offer students before they get to the point of requiring an exit interview, so identifying a struggling student, an unhappy student and creating an atmosphere with your own students by which they can tell you if there are any problems, so you can put the support in place to prevent them having to consider leaving. So in a

sense, sometimes the actual exit interview can be a formality, because the work has gone before. (Tutor 5, p1)

Example 5: Having a pre-exit interview meeting

So, for instance, we might have, certainly pre-exit interview meetings with people. So, for instance, quite often I get students tell me they're thinking of leaving and I will see them, but I won't go armed with an exit form usually. I will try and unpack what is lying under their request. (Tutor 5, p1)

Example 6: Programme team communication

Well, we do have very good communication I think within the programme team. So, if I'm having a conversation with a ... in the first instance the tutees are likely to approach their Personal Tutor and from there they would probably, if it's a big issue, they'd probably go to Head of Student Support ... So we try to have an audit trail of how we've managed the situation. If it becomes a formal issue, we'd probably have two tutors and we'd record the interview quite formally, but in the normal way of things it's just with exchanged email and also various conversations with people like [name of student support] or the Branch Leaders or Directors of Studies. So we try and work in a collaborative manner. (Tutor 5, p5)

Example 7: A smart System

I think we've got very smart systems, so there is good communication and that can be very helpful in terms of organisational aspects. So we don't get placements not knowing a student has left and therefore mentors in practice saying "Why hasn't this person turned up?" and we know if they've not submitted work it's because they've left. So in that sense it helps the smooth running of the organisation. So I think that probably is very good, about the system; and what I think is very good also is that when we're filling out the exit form, probably rather more often than not, we're filling out a course interruption form, rather than a course leaving form. We've got very good systems for tracking students who are on a course interrupt. So we know when they are expected back and we can contact them and make sure that everything's put in place for them for the time they come back. That seems to have had a very good effect on people choosing to come back after a course interrupt... if students were taking the course interruption, the likelihood was that they would not be returning to the programme, but now the likelihood is that they will because the systems are stronger. (Tutor 5, p1-2)

Example 8: Exploring possible options

I'd had three of those students over the three and a half years that I've been here, and each time what I've done is I've gone to either A [tutor] or B [Tutor] or C [Tutor], people who have a lot of experience with students wanting to leave the programme. Each time what I've done is, I've said to the student "Do you mind if I just bring a colleague in to come and chat with us because we need to be sure that all of your possible options to help you stay on the programme are explored?" And each time, we've been successful at retaining that student. And those three, over the last three and a half years that were my personal students, haven't left the programme. (Tutor 6, p3)

Example 9: A flexible system

And given an opportunity to take some time out, to have an interruption from their programme, had been enough for two of them. One of them didn't even need that. She just needed to talk. She almost just needed some counseling and knowing that we would support her and we gave her extensions for her work, so that she knew she didn't have to submit things that weren't ready because of the stress. In this particular case it was a divorce, and she couldn't cope. So you know, the flexibility that we have within the system when students are struggling is pretty good at retaining students. Certainly in my own experience and I can only talk from my own experience. And those three students, they were all in the September 2003 group, and they've all now graduated and are qualified nurses. (Tutor 6, p3)

4.5 Telephone interviews with students

In order to gain a better understanding of the reasons why students leave, as well as capturing the 'student voices' behind statistics on attrition and leaving reasons we contacted students who had left their programmes within a six month period in the previous year (the exact timing only known by research team in order to protect identity of participants). Students who had left because of academic failure were excluded. The total sample consisted of 29 students who were first contacted via a letter which asked if they wanted to participate in the study. They were later contacted via telephone and a short interview (15-30 minutes) was conducted. We obtained contact with 14 former students and all but one (too busy at the time) agreed to participate. The researcher took detailed notes during the interview, which has been written up as 'case studies' presented below.

Of the 13 case studies:

- There were 12 women and 1 man
- Their ages ranged from 19 to 45 years old when they left the programme. The mean age was 25 years old.
- The participants had been studying on the following programmes:

Nursing Studies (Adult) DipHE	3
Nursing Studies (Child) DipHE	2
Nursing Studies (Mental Health) DipHE	1
Nursing Studies (Adult) DipHE – Part-time	1
Nursing Studies (Adult Nursing) BSc	3
Nursing Studies (Child Nursing) BSc	1
Midwifery Studies (Registered Midwife) BSc	2
<u>Total students in sample</u>	<u>13</u>

Some of the details and circumstances have been changed in order to protect the identity of the participants. Pseudonyms have been given. The case studies are ordered and grouped according to primary reason recorded on exit interview form:

- Not liking nursing (1 case study)
- Health problems (2 case studies)
- Family commitments (2 case studies)
- Financial responsibilities (2 case studies)
- Programme too demanding (2 case studies)
- Travel/transport difficulties and accommodation problem (2 case studies)
- Primary reason not recorded (2 case studies)

Not liking nursing/midwifery

CASE STUDY 1 – ALICE

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Not liking nursing

Secondary reason: Course not what was expecting

Interview data:

This was an 18 year old female who left the Degree course during year one after seven months. The student explained that she did not enjoy the subject; *'Basically I found that I was doing the same thing everyday; always the same basic tasks. I started thinking of leaving on my first ward; it was an orthopaedic ward. The theory was fine it's just the practice. Obviously I spoke to my friends and family; not anyone from University. Question - Why? Because I didn't really think they could help me the way I felt'.*

Student had an exit interview. The leaving category that had been used was 'not liking nursing' and respondent still felt this was the reason why she left. At the time of the interview Alice worked in a supermarket checkout, but had applied to do a Biology Degree at another University.

Health problems

CASE STUDY 2 – PETER

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Health problems

Secondary reason: Not liking nursing/course not that was expecting

Interview data:

Peter is a 21 year old man who dropped out halfway through the first year on the Diploma programme. He started thinking about leaving 6 months before. The student clarified: *'the stress of the course was getting to me and I had health problems.'* The student first spoke to friends and people on the course. He had also mentioned to his personal tutor a month before what was going on.

He remembered having an exit interview and that he'd said health reasons first, then stress second (both stress in general and stress on programme). *'Personal tutor was looking out for what was best for me. She handled it quite well and said they are used to people dropping out slowly over time.'*

Peter currently works in IT and possibly wants to go back to the course in the future. He explained that leaving was all amicable and that there was nothing wrong with the course.

CASE STUDY 3 – INGRID

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Health problems + family commitments

Secondary reason: n/a

Interview data:

25 year old female who completed 1.5 year on Degree programme. This student had also deferred one year in the first year due to financial problems.

Student was having serious health complications with her own pregnancy. At the time she only spoke to close family members. She was then given the possibility to interrupt programme and did not return. Ingrid had an exit interview over the phone: *'Personally I didn't think it fit into any of the categories. I just felt that having gone through my pregnancy problems and delivering someone's baby was too upsetting.'*

Ingrid now works in a children's day nursery looking after children from 3 months upwards. She would like to return in the future *'but not do it in same university because they will think I've dropped out once and will not complete.'*

Family commitments

CASE STUDY 4 – SOPHIA

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Family Commitments

Secondary reason: n/a

Interview data:

20 year old female, who completed 6 months on Degree programme. The former student described:

'I fell pregnant and talked to my personal tutor. She was really helpful. I did not think about it too long. Perhaps 2 to 3 weeks before leaving. Main reason was being pregnant. I needed to sort myself out and to get clothes for the baby.'

Sophia could not remember having an exit interview and did not remember leaving categories. She explained that she only left because she was pregnant and that there were no other reasons.

Participant described how she did enjoy the course and now was waiting for baby to arrive. She wants to go back to University, but to restart at a university in London.

CASE STUDY 5 - SYLVIA

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Family commitments

Secondary reason: none recorded

Interview data:

21 year old female who studied on Diploma programme. She explained: *'I did a year and a bit and left at the end of Oct second year. I spoke to my personal tutor. I had an operation and this meant that I've had a lot to make up in the course. I decided I needed to take time out. To complicate things, I was due back in September 06 but then I got pregnant. I've now got a girl'*

The student talked to her personal tutor and explained that she had to leave as she had fallen pregnant, but the reasons before this had to do with her health status. However, the student felt that *'my reason has changed since I 'left' to take time off. I mean, it's my foot and my operation that made me realise that I could not manage with the course work, me being off Uni and placement, I knew I couldn't cope with the backlog of course work.'*

After leaving this student worked in a child day centre, but at the time of the interview she was home full time with her new baby. She was hoping to return to nursing in a few years time.

Financial difficulties

CASE STUDY 6 - ELSA

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Financial difficulties

Secondary reason: not completed (comment from tutor – 'other employer is creating difficulties')

Interview data:

Elsa is 43 year old female who had studied on Diploma Programme and left after one year. She started thinking of leaving over the summer and decided not to go back.

She felt that *'the experience was not too bad, the tutor was not pushing me. I emailed them and they gave me a year on interrupt. After a year I got a letter and decided not to come back.'*

This student had foster children at the time and they were coming up for 'adult placement', which meant that training with social services had to be completed. Her partner had also been made redundant. The respondent explained: *'You have to make ends meet. The nursing course was full time. I also worked at the weekend. Fostering was part of the income. I had to make a choice – the house or the career!'*

Can't remember having an exit interview but had discussion with tutor over the phone who asked if the reason for leaving was professional or personal and student at the time said both. When the respondent was asked by the researcher she explained that the primary reason was 'financial difficulties' and secondary reason 'course not what was expecting'. It was also explained how this student would have enjoyed *'more hands-on and more hospital based work - like the apprentice model. There was lots of theory that was not that interesting. Otherwise the nurses on the ward were incredibly helpful. Tutors were great. Can't fault them at all'*

Since leaving University Elsa was working as a Healthcare Assistant and fostering children. Probably would not like to go back to nursing, but was thinking of doing a Foundation Degree.

CASE STUDY 7 - ELISABETH

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Financial difficulties

Secondary reason: Relationship difficulties/family/partner

Interview data:

25 year old female on Diploma programme who completed six months of programme.

Elisabeth finished the first portfolio and really enjoyed the first term at University. However, she started thinking about leaving on the first placement just after Christmas. The student explained: *'I had to move house because of placement location and had to leave the house at 5.45, could not be housed close to the placement area. I started to realise I could not do it. Travel to placement, have no food, not any support. When we moved out of the halls of residence we had to find our own accommodation and had to find money for deposit. Tried to change placement area and that did not work. I wanted to stay in Guildford. I wanted to leave anyway. I could not afford going. To be honest, it was not exactly what I thought it was going to be. The placement. I was left to my own devices. It was in a secure hospital. I was supposed to have a mentor but I never met her. Most of the time I just sat there reading. You put yourself at risk. Had a bleep. I was scared. Not really much learning going on. Talked to University tutor and they said that is just the way it is. They said they would pay a visit to the placement area, but it never happened. Did 3-4 weeks of the placement and then left.'*

Overall this student felt the Surrey campus was good. She felt it was easier to stay focused when at University. She emphasised the need for more financial support for students who cannot get support from their families and felt communication could be improved. In order to get hold of tutors she called and left messages but this was expensive and she often ran out of credit on mobile phone and had no internet.

Elisabeth was now working for a family run business and was not considering going back to the course. She felt it was the right decision to leave from speaking to friends that had qualified as *'NHS difficult place right now and gets bad press in the media'*.

Programme too demanding

CASE STUDY 8 – ABIGAIL

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Programme too demanding

Secondary reason: n/a

Student was on interrupt after completing 1st year (reason: not liking nursing and 'professional misconduct issues')

Interview data:

19 year old female whose original choice was to be a midwife, but she did not meet criteria and places were full so she was offered a place on the nursing diploma programme. She explained what happened on her first placement: *'When I went into practice. I didn't like it. Then I was so depressed. I spoke to my personal tutor and everybody I saw, including [tutor name], I mean, they all kept saying 'you can do it'. It was helpful but in my mind I still felt that I didn't like nursing. The tutors drew up an action plan like 'turning up for my shift'. I was not turning up in practice because I did not like it.'*

Abigail had an exit interview and chose 'Not liking nursing'. *'Tutor went through the primary reasons and she said 'course work was too much'- it was one after another. I think it was a mixture – especially if you have something on your mind like I want to do midwifery.'*

She was now applying to do a laboratory assistant job and was waiting for an interview. When asked if she would consider doing midwifery, she answered: *'But not at that University in case the tutors think 'that student, oh she probably 'collapses' again and it is kind of embarrassing for me. I must say that as soon as I left, I did feel some regrets and asked 'why didn't I carry on?' But I still think I wouldn't like adult nursing.'*

CASE STUDY 9 - ERICA

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Programme too demanding

Secondary reason: Liking nursing/programme too demanding (note: 'not' deleted. See also tutors notes. Sponsored student. Very complex)

Interview data:

28 year old female Diploma student, who completed 1.5 year of the programme. This student was diagnosed with dyslexia during her part-time programme. Student explained how she received some help and a computer from 'learning support'. However, as she was based at a satellite campus she felt she did not get the same support as students in Guildford who apparently can access 'special programmes' from library. ***'Researcher: How did you get on with your essays? I failed most of them and had to retake. I did not really see my personal tutor. Emailed them and had appointment. Was cancelled. They were too busy. I did get some help from learning support, but they are not nurses, and did not understand what I was talking about.'***

The respondent concluded by saying that she felt that more help and support was needed. It was felt that the mentor in practice was able to support appropriately and that the placements were easier as: *'for me it is easier to show and do rather than write'*. She also explained that she had contact with people still on course, but that it sometimes was too upsetting for her. The student could not remember choosing 'reasons for leaving', but when given the alternatives, stated that probably was 'programme too demanding'.

At the time of the interview the respondent was working as a nurse assistant in a previous placement area.

Travel/transport difficulties and accommodation problem

CASE STUDY 10 – CASSANDRA

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: Travel/transport difficulties

Secondary reason: Family commitments/financial difficulties

Interview data:

32 year old female with young daughter, who completed six months on the Degree programme. Student had transport problems from the beginning and discussed this both with the Director of Studies and Personal Tutor who gave a few options – one was to leave completely and then re-apply, but it was explained that there was no guarantee that she would end up doing her placements closer to home. The student wanted to change placement as travel cost her £20 per day and took 3 hours one way. She worked some shifts from 7 in the morning until 8 in the evening and did not come home until 11. She then had to be up the next morning and had a 3 year old girl. She said: *'Felt like I was wasting my money'*. The reason given by the tutors that the student could not change her placement was that there was not enough space in the placement area closer to her home. The metaphor of a full bus was given by the tutor; *'If there are only 20 seats and you are the 21st passenger there are no seats for you'*.

After six months the student told the personal tutor that she wanted to leave and the personal tutor gave her one week to think about final decision. Cassandra could not remember having an exit interview or choosing 'leaving categories'. During the interview the researcher listed the leaving categories to the student and she choose 'travel/transport' as primary reason, and 'financial difficulties' as second reason. Later the student changed her mind and said 'financial difficulties' should be primary reason. If she had been able to afford the travel she would have stayed on the programme. She also told the researcher that it was with regret she had had to leave. To become a nurse had always been her dream and when she got the place at Surrey she was thrilled. At the time of the interview Cassandra was starting work as a healthcare assistant. In the future, she might re-apply do nursing in London.

CASE STUDY 11 – TANYA

Student exit interview form

Primary Reason: Accommodation problems

Secondary reason: Financial difficulties/accommodation costs too high/placement is too far

Interview data:

18 year old female who completed six months of Diploma programme. *'I went to do the course and found that I was located so far away on placement'*. The student could not get NHS accommodation and were given numbers of estate agents from University: *'What happened basically I couldn't live there, had to move back home because I couldn't afford it. I was leaving home at 4-5 in the morning and transport at that time of the morning was not good. Not making it on time was another thing. Just paying rent and food, I found I went straight into overdraft.'*

The student spoke to her Personal Tutor. She said *'I'm focusing my energy on the fact that I'm in that locality and not on the one I wish to go to ... I think if accommodation was resolved, that would have helped. I didn't have an exit interview as such, I spoke on the phone. It was a sad thing but I thought it was not going to work. I decided that I had to leave the course. Couldn't make the travelling. Think about myself - I was only 17 I just left home, it's a big jump for me you know.'* The reasons for leaving were described during interview as both financial and accommodation. The student explained: *'The root problem was financial. It affects your work as well. When you're getting just about £500 per month and having to pay*

nearly £400 for accommodation I was worrying about where I'm going to live and how I'm going to afford to live.'

At the time of the interview Tania was doing a level 2 NVQ and had become pregnant. She was considering doing nursing again, but probably in London this time.

Primary reason not recorded

CASE STUDY 12 – FIONA

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: nothing recorded

Secondary reason: nothing recorded (note that tutor has tried to get hold of student, without success)

Interview data:

27 year old female who left towards end of Midwifery Degree programme. She explained:

'I spoke to some of the lecturers who knew about my problem. I just had dissertation to submit. It was due in December but I had an extension and was not able to meet the deadline, plus everything that was going on with me. It was personal and family problems as well. On top of that, I was involved in an incident involving a staff nurse on that unit during my programme. It all got quite messy and I had to go to Court. I found it too stressful, it was just too much.'

She could not remember having an exit interview. *'Might have been on the phone. I mean at that time I was going through so much stress. I couldn't think clearly really, to be honest.'*

She now works as staff nurse and had not got round to contact the University. She would like to get another submission date for dissertation and to complete the programme.

CASE STUDY 13 – LUCINDA

Student exit interview form:

Primary Reason: not completed

Secondary reason: not completed

Tutor's comment on form: student said in phone call that applied originally to do midwifery and did not enjoy nursing

Interview data:

20 year old female who studied on Degree programme for one month. Lucinda explained how she started thinking about leaving directly at start. She did not speak to anybody, instead just left. University (EIHMS) phoned up after one month and asked if student could come in, but she did not have the time. *'The tutor's main concern seemed to be that I was still on bursary (was not) rather than that I had left. She did explore the reasons why I had left though.'*

Lucinda then explained how she had applied to do midwifery and that admissions staff has advised her to do nursing first for three years, then midwifery 'top-up'. *'It sounded good at the time, but I did not enjoy it as I should have. Courses are very separate. They should have told me that nursing and midwifery students do not train together. Nursing is based on sick people and midwifery on healthy women.'* When primary categories were listed the respondent choose 'not liking nursing', but she emphasised that she did like midwifery.

Chapter 5 Discussion and recommendations

In this chapter, our discussion will focus on the key aspects relating to the foci of the study and the findings. Under each key aspect, we have included a text box with recommendations.

5.1 Investigating the student exit interview

Initially this project set out to investigate the student exit interview. While carrying out the research it was soon realised that the exit interview is just one part of the student's leaving process. As the participants in the interviews explained, it is often a 'long drawn process', which can last months, even years. Therefore, the focus of the project widened to include examining the process rather than the structure in place. Tutors highlighted that the important discussions with the student tended to take place before the exit interview. Presently, this data is kept in the form of copies of emails and notes from meetings in the student personal files. Given the scope of the research and following guidance from our Advisory group, it was agreed that tracking through student files for this type of data and to conduct any form of analysis would be very difficult to capture.

The Advisory group helped identify key informants across the University who could contribute to our scoping exercise. These key informants included programme administrators who could provide valuable information on individual 'School' policy on exit interview and any tool use, and those who play a significant role in student support. For example, one of the researchers held a face to face discussion with the Head of Central student support about student attrition and what they thought students reasons for leaving were.

In this study, we also explored the potential need to develop a new exit interview tool/form. However, our preliminary findings arising from our scoping exercise involving other Schools and focus group with tutors, and following guidance from the Advisory Group, led to the considered approach to focus on the process involved in exit interviews, as outlined earlier.

5.2 Mapping the process

Our findings indicate that within the Division of Health and Social Care, the process of exit interviews is fairly clear. One of the programme administrators has a key role in maintaining the database and issues a monthly 'student activity' statement. This statement provides detailed information on any students who are 'leavers' [those who left their programme], or 'interrupts', or 're-joins' [those who interrupted and re-joined

their programme], Branch transfer [those who changed the branch in nursing], or Trust transfer [those who changed the 'trust' for which they are based in practice]. Information pertaining to student cohort, reason(s) for leaving or interrupting, date left, personal tutor were also provided in the statement. This statement is issued electronically to designated members of the teaching staff and finance office. We also found that based on the monthly activity statement, the finance office issues another statement to the Registry to advise on the termination of bursary. What is clear in this study is that the teaching staff we interviewed were unclear of the end-point of the exit interview data and would have liked some feedback on student attrition.

This study revealed the process of the student exit and staff involved. It has raised questions around who is responsible for collecting data about students leaving and who is responsible for managing and overseeing student attrition. It seems it should be 'everybody's business', but in order for staff to feel responsible they need to feel involved and understand the rationale for collecting and recording information about student's leaving reasons effectively. Ownership and responsibility for attrition need to be transparent and we recommend that workshops could be set up with all levels of staff to discuss student attrition. This study has shown strong commitment by staff to reduce attrition, but it appears they do not necessarily have the right tools and information to make a strategic impact.

Recommendations

- We recommend a more effective coding system, which needs to be streamlined. The statistical data showed that many of the leaving categories had not been used in the last two years and could therefore be deleted.
- The exit interview monthly data could be used more strategically, with a designated member of staff made known to academic staff of their specific role in relation to student attrition and retention.
- We recommend more transparency on how the data is produced and presented, to help Director's of Studies, module leaders and personal tutors to appreciate their contribution to support students.
- We recommend that the Division set targets for reducing student attrition and that progress is reviewed regularly.

5.3 Telephone interviews with students/case studies

The telephone interviews carried out for this project with students that had left proved to be an interesting and valuable exercise. It revealed the complexities of why students leave and clearly showed that choosing one leaving category for the purpose of the exit interview is not straightforward. It provided in-depth data that can be used in a strategic way to inform policies around recruitment and retention. In

addition, the students who participated were all positive and willing to share their views about their leaving experience, as well as the reasons behind leaving. They were also very open to discuss their experiences and views about the content and delivery of the programme.

Many also commented that they felt good about reflecting and talking about their experiences. The researchers felt that it was lethargic for the former students and in a way offered a kind of 'closure'. One possible outcome of this is that they might be left with a more positive view of their experience at the University of Surrey, which is important for our reputation as a high quality University. Some of the students in the case studies explained that they might come back to studying in the future. Following up on students that have left provides an opportunity to encourage them to choose Surrey again or to recommend the University of Surrey to friends and family.

The telephone interviews also revealed that sometimes students interrupt their programme for a particular reason and this reason might change during time. When the students finally decide to leave another reason is given and recorded for statistical reasons by the university. This has the potential to skew the data and not reflect the original reasons why students left the programme.

In addition, the case studies highlighted the extreme financial hardship that many students face and specifically how this affect their ability to focus on their studies and in extreme cases, even to travel to placement areas. This links with issues around widening participation and support structures and information needed for students who come from backgrounds not associated with HE.

Recommendations

- We recommend that somebody externally from teaching, either a research centre, or suitable administrative staff, make contact with students that left their programmes, after a period of between 6 to 10 months. The purpose of this would be to collect data on why the students left and to provide 'closure' for student that had a bad experience.
- The way the Division records and analyses data in relation to students who interrupt there programme needs to be reviewed in order to make information useful and meaningful.

5.4 Leaving categories

This project statistics on leaving reasons shows the three highest categories are; not liking subject 18%, health problems 15% and family commitments 10%. These reasons have none or little relationship to students' perception or actual experience of the course or teaching and therefore lie beyond the direct control of the University.

However, the category 'not liking nursing/midwifery' needs further unpicking as this category most likely contains a number of underlying reasons. Our case studies with the students revealed that students who had originally applied to a midwifery course, but that had instead been advised by admissions staff to study nursing, often stated 'not liking nursing'. Yet, these participants explained that they still wished to do the midwifery course. Other findings from the interviews with tutors and the students that had left uncover this category further. It is clear that some students use this category as they are not enjoying the practical side of the subject and others as they are not confident or not enjoying the academic or theory aspects of the subject.

Recommendations

- The student recruitment team would benefit from reading the case studies in this report in order to review recruitment strategies, specifically in relation to applicant to midwifery programmes.

5.5 Changing programme

Through our interviews with students who left the programme, we found that a few have considered returning to HE but pursuing a different course of study.

Recommendations

- We recommend a policy that offers students who have decided to leave because of having chosen the 'wrong' course to 'transfer' their registration to another Division within the faculty or to another faculty.
- Some leverage is recommended to ensure that exit interview includes asking if student would consider alternative course/programme at the University of Surrey.

5.6 Good Practice

Our study has identified several aspects of good practice within the Division of Health and Social Care and teaching staff must be commended for their great contribution in this area. Key features of good practice included good programme team communication, having a flexible and smart system that allows students time to explore ways of managing the issue and other possible options instead of having to leave. Good practice also works when the Personal Tutor plays a key role in providing a supportive 'atmosphere' and good liaison within the programme team. These aspects of good practice can be replicable in other Divisions and Schools across the University.

Recommendations:

- We recommend that personal tutors continue to make time to meet with their tutees regularly and be alert to any concerns raised by students.
- Good effective communication system should be maintained so that students' concern can be easily flagged up and readily dealt with before it reached a stage of no return.
- Instigate a flexible system so that students can consider an 'interrupt' in their programme; at the same time, ensure smooth administration and transition when students are due to 're-join'.
- Sharing of good practice in exit interview would foster inter-Division and inter-school working.

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**Appendix 1 Notes made from telephone interviews with other Schools across University of Surrey.
February - September 2007**

Schools	Topics/issues	Comments
SBMS	Does school conduct exit interview (EI)	Every student will be asked to speak to either personal tutor or GC; we get to letter from them about why they're leaving. GC will conduct EI if PT are not free.
	Do you use a particular form/questionnaire?	No. we tend to have an informal chat and record it but it's not recorded as a formal interview.
	What reasons do students give for leaving?	Normally, there's a change in career plan, or subject is not suitable for them; it could be academic struggle, or ill health or personal reasons. Sometimes it could be wanting to transfer to another school. Usually accommodation officer may find out about student leaving and get in touch. When students leave they don't want to hang around.
	How many leavers do you have in a year?	My guess is about 2-3 per year, usually undergrads.
	Do you think the current system works well?	Yes, the system works well so far. We have a form that is quite detailed really.
	Would you be interested in piloting the form when we've developed one?	Yes, I would be interested.
PGMS	Does school conduct exit interview?	No, we don't. Most of our students are postgraduates, are working full-time so normal exit interviews are not appropriate.
	What happens when a student decides to leave?	They wouldn't get that far to reach that stage. In principle, we are sort of having an exit interview but an informal one.
	Who does it?	Programme director, who's likely to be their personal tutor.
	Any form used?	None, we have a totally different structure in our programme. For example, on our gynae programme, we currently have 19 students. Last year, I think only one student course terminated because of academic failure. It would be worthwhile for you to speak with [name], on our pharmaceutical programme.

PGMS	Tell me about the programme you are involved with?	We offer MSc Pharmaceutical medicine/clinical pharmacology, it's a modular programme and we have no specific intake. Our module runs twice a year usually Sept and March but this year, we're running it three times a year. It's run on three consecutive days and they have an assignment to complete within 8 weeks. Most of them are in full time employment.
	How many leavers do you get a year?	We don't have accurate figures; post registration lasts for 6 years and once registered, they stay on for that period and they should have completed then. But they can have extension too. The programme comprises 12 modules and a dissertation.
	What are the main reasons for leaving?	Changes in circumstances, jobs or life change; sometimes occasionally their funding dries up; or just lack of motivation. It's a professional development course.
	Do you conduct Exit interviews?	No, we don't do EI because our students come from all over the world. They generally let me know via email although we're trying to introduce EI. If students wish to withdraw they email me. I acknowledge that and arranged for credits to be awarded. This I go through the Board of Examiners. I will involve Registry but I don't offer reasons for leaving to Registry.
	How well current system works?	Satisfactory up till now. But things are changing; we're going to put it on a better footing. This programme is 10 credits, now we have to make it 15 credits like the rest of the Univ. We're having to introduce EI form (Dr Ruth Hargreaves). It'll have to be on line questionnaire because of overseas or something that can be done over the phone. I communicate with them on their personal email account. Because they're overseas, they don't tend to use their Unis email account, they have their own work email account. This is a very different programme, highly regarded internationally. We're not being awkward.
School of Management	How students do you think leave your programme in a year?	I would think about 10-15 students out of about 260 odd on our programme; generally they try to complete it within three years.
	Do you use any exit interview form in your school?	Not really but we do complete a form to send to Registry. This includes the student's ID.
	Who conducts it and when?	Normally line manager, if not HR.
	Can you tell me more about the process	We try to encourage students to make contact either in person to see them. Usually they are encouraged to see their personal tutor or Course Director. But we have no formal process. We do have a Help Desk which

	<p>when a student decides to leave the programme?</p> <p>How do you go about categorise their reasons for leaving?</p> <p>What changes, if any would you like to make to current exit interview process?</p> <p>On average, what percentage of your students leave?</p>	<p>opens from 0915-1700. They can come and speak to us, and then we refer them to their Personal Tutor. There is a generic email/Help Desk. We have a policy that we try and response to any query within a week. We tend to categorise them, we give the reason if we're aware of it and last date of attendance, I mean last day at UniS. Some leave country before we know they've left. Normally we hear about this when we receive a letter (if they write) – students are told to put things in writing. Normally we'll just paraphrase them. Due to personal reason, we don't category them. Registry does.</p> <p>Prefer an actual process that a student is required to meet with personal tutor, for example, if they're stressed we might not know how to help if they don't talk to someone about it. If students left already we cannot make contact; it depends on students, if they leave any contact details.</p> <p>No idea.</p>
School of Human Sciences	<p>Does school conduct exit interview (EI)</p> <p>Who normally conducts the interview?</p> <p>Do you use a particular form/questionnaire?</p> <p>What reasons do students give for leaving? How do you categorise?</p> <p>How many leavers do you have in a year?</p> <p>Do you think the current system works well?</p>	<p>No, not formally. Never come up as an issue in meetings. Attrition is not that high. Around 5%. What we do have is students that register on the 4 year programme, but choose not to take the placement year. They still get a degree.</p> <p>No interview, but student will go to personal tutor if they are thinking of leaving or having problems. They will discuss different options.</p> <p>They use the registry form. This is completed by personal tutor and then signed off by head of school.</p> <p>Often there are 'fairly traumatic reasons' and nothing could be done to make students stay. Or they have chosen the wrong course. Students tell us why they are leaving, it could be financial reasons etc.</p> <p>If something is changed, do not need any more bureaucracy. Guess the form could include an open field where comments could be made. However, important that that data would be used.</p>

School of Engineering	<p>Does school conduct exit interview?</p> <p>Who normally conducts the interview?</p> <p>How many leavers do you have in a year?</p> <p>Do you use a particular form/questionnaire?</p> <p>What reasons do students give for leaving?</p> <p>Anything else you wish to add?</p> <p>Anything that need changing with process?</p>	<p>Makes sure that students who 'exit early' would come and see myself. I have a professional responsibility to find out that students are not making hasty decisions. For example, had a guy recently who wanted to leave after one week. I wanted to find out that it was a well-grounded decision.</p> <p>Respondent himself. If not available, will delegate to other member of staff.</p> <p>Out of an intake of around 180 under-graduates, 3 to 4 students will leave quite early on.</p> <p>No, a discussion is held. Some information will be put in student's personal file. An email is sent to department student support office. They then initiate the forms etc. that goes to registry. The reason for leaving is communicated to support office.</p> <p>I t can be financial or family reasons or feel they have chosen the wrong course.</p> <p>Never been asked about this process before. The professional bodies want to see attrition/drop-out rates, both academic and non-academic. The programme directors produce statistics.</p> <p>Personally, feels a formalised procedure might be un-necessary. However, something in the system that set of trigger when somebody wants to leave might be useful. It should also be writing into the duties and responsibilities of programme directors.</p>
SEPS	Email reply	<p>We don't have a formal system/paperwork in place; the course directors or personal tutors will try and conduct a discussion with the student to make sure the student is leaving for the right reason - if possible. Sometimes the student leaves with no direct contact being possible (i.e they email). The current process seems to be working ok - although the information on retention does tend to be contained so we have no data as such. However, retention is not a particular concern for us at present (i.e. numbers leaving are minimal). But yes, of course we could improve on this by introducing a paper form/system but no, we don't have any plans to do so at the moment.</p> <p>A meeting is also set up with the relevant programme directors or/and the DUS to discuss with the student his/her reasons for leaving the university, this is to ensure they are making the correct decision and to find out where they may be planning to transfer to and why. Not aware of a more formal procedure as such.</p>