What Works? Student Retention and Success Project

Good practice in student retention: an examination of the effects of student integration on non-completion

Project partners: University of Hull, Newcastle University and University of Sunderland (Lead institution)

August 2011

Introduction to abridged report

This is the abridged version of a longer project report, prepared for use within Newcastle University. Chapter titles and numbering in this abridged version are as in the original report.

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2.2 Executive Summary

This report is the product of a partnership between the University of Hull, Newcastle University, and the University of Sunderland. We used a primarily qualitative methodology to study the effects of nine distinct initiatives on students’ sense of social and academic integration. Quantitative and statistical data were used to support the qualitative findings on the effect of integration on student retention.

The research question underpinning our collaborative study was:

Does a student’s sense of integration support their retention?

The research focused on mature students, first year students, part-time students, and local students. Newcastle University focussed on the subject area of Engineering, with students from a range of subject areas included in the University of Hull and the University of Sunderland’s investigations.

To put the issue of retention in context, in the cross-institution survey at the beginning of our research a third of respondents said they had considered withdrawing during the first year of their current course. Students placed an
emphasis on the importance of the academic experience of university over the social experience of university. The overall message from our research was that:

Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff, and to engage with the curriculum.

This integration of social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School, and wider University, community. We found that supporting students to feel part of their School, and wider university, community facilitates the development of both a sense of belonging, and of the relationships with staff and students that become a student’s network of support. This shared experience reinforces their academic endeavour, bringing continuity and a sense of involvement and engagement both with fellow students and with the curriculum.

Our quantitative evidence that fewer students withdrew in our evaluation years than in previous years suggests that the integration-focused activities in this research contributed to the retention of more students.

Our interlinked key messages from this research on the effects of student integration on retention are:

- Key message A: Integration of the social and academic elements of university life is key to the integration of students into the School and wider University community
- Key message B: Early imposition of structures upon students by staff appears effective in giving a sense of continuity and purpose
- Key message C: Teams and groups working collaboratively on academic tasks enhance their social opportunities
- Key message D: Integrating social and academic elements of university life encourages students to build relations with each other and with staff and to engage with the curriculum.

Taken together, our key messages demonstrate the need for a holistic approach to student engagement. This approach continues throughout a student’s university career: from initial outreach and contact, through applications and pre-entry, during induction and initial stages, and beyond.
The three key implications of these findings were:

- Acceptance of the concept that social and academic integration are reliant upon each other for their fullest effect offers the opportunity for comprehensive institutional strategies for retention.

- That the provision of School and institutional support and encouragement for the key role played by academic staff in student integration is essential. Academic staff have a key role to play in providing students with a sense of structure within an academic environment in which social interaction with students and staff is facilitated.

- Adoption of a student-centred, collaborative team or group approach to learning may require substantial reorganisation of the learning environment including changes in pedagogical practice, assessment and student supervision. This may also require School and institutional support.

We suggest that integration-focused activities can help students integrate with peers on their course, and with their School and university communities. We suggest that students who are both socially and academically integrated are more likely to persist with their courses, and that this in turn may have a positive impact on their retention.

We offer this report as our contribution to the national *What Works? Student retention and success* programme of research.

### 4 Aims and objectives of evaluation

The research question underpinning our collaborative study was:

Does a student’s sense of integration support their retention?

To examine this question, new and existing initiatives at the three partner universities were evaluated. This research sought to establish through mainly qualitative enquiry supported by additional quantitative measures the effect of these initiatives’ on
students’ sense of integration, and consequent retention, within each university’s previously specified areas of student focus.

What is student integration? Student integration is generally regarded as having two constituent parts: social and academic. Although widely used, these concepts lack specific definition. Tinto’s model (2006) of student retention examined the effect of social and academic student integration, both formal and informal, but refrained from giving an operational definition due to a belief that integration may acquire different meanings in different academic and cultural contexts (Severiens and Wolff, 2008). There has also been a developing understanding of the relationship between the institution and the student. Zepke and Leach (2005) suggested that academic institutions may need to adopt a greater degree of flexibility in embracing the cultures from which students enter the university, rather than expecting students to surrender their pre-student identities in order to become encultured within the institution.

Integration, both academic and social, appears to be interlinked in a complex, recursive way. As Severiens and Schmidt (2009) pointed out:

‘those who feel at home, who take part in extra-curricular activities, and who feel connected with fellow students and teachers, are more inclined to persist with their studies. Without social integration, it is more difficult to persist, and ultimately to graduate’ (p.60).

The integration strategies implemented within each institution, both existing and newly developed, all focused on bringing together in groups students vulnerable to non-continuation, either to work together academically or to link socially. In each case the melding of these two aspects of potential integration was explored and any resultant impact upon students’ perceptions of their sense of belonging was identified, particularly where the number of students persisting with their studies and the impact upon that university’s rate of retention could be determined.

5 Details of interventions and practices evaluated
This section gives details of the interventions and practices evaluated, organised by partner institution.
5.1 University of Hull
At the University of Hull two activities aimed specifically at mature full-time and part-time students were evaluated. In addition an enhanced system of supervisor contact within the School of Social Studies was also examined.

5.1.1 Study Skills Summer School
The Study Skills Summer School is a free, two day, non-residential course held on the main Hull campus. It is open to both new and continuing part-time and mature full-time students. It includes a combination of lectures, seminars and practical tasks, and aims to deliver an authentic university experience with a focus on the development of academic study skills. These include sessions focused on critical and analytical thinking, note taking, and essay writing as well as referencing and plagiarism. A shared lunch punctuates each day and aims to provide an environment in which interaction between student peers and with academic and support staff can take place.

5.1.2 Mature Student Welcome Lunch
This event has taken place since 2005 on both the Hull and Scarborough campuses in the week prior to registration. Full-time mature students are invited and the aim of the event is “an opportunity to learn more about the University and a chance to meet other new, as well as existing students” (University of Hull booking leaflet, 2010). Students are allocated places around circular tables according to the programme on which they will be studying. Interaction is encouraged through a quiz about the University for which prizes are awarded. As one participant neatly described it, it is “a social event, but with a purpose”.

5.1.3 Supervisor contact arrangements (School of Social Sciences)
An enhanced system of pastoral and academic supervision was introduced into the School in 2009/10. This new system seeks to be a formal supervisory structure that provides support and boundaries, the opportunity for tutors to keep in touch with students. It also aims to be, as one academic described it, “sociology in practice” by addressing issues of normlessness that Durkheim (1970) described as anomie: a personal feeling of mismatch or lack of social norms. In doing so, this system links students together in groups during the earliest stages of induction, and provides the opportunity for students to work together on an introductory task. These initial groups provide the basis of an ongoing tutor group with a shared personal supervisor, who
will work together over the first year combining ‘universal’ or core modules with study skills and elements of pastoral care.

5.2 Newcastle University
At Newcastle University two Schools of Engineering introduced initiatives aimed at increasing interaction between students. In the School of Mechanical & Systems Engineering (M&SE) this focused on academic integration and in the School of Chemical Engineering & Advanced Materials (CEAM) the emphasis was on increasing social integration.

5.2.1 The T shirt exercise
The School of Chemical Engineering and Advanced Materials (CEAM) has traditionally held a welcome reception for all new students in the first week of the first semester. In 2009/10, as a response to the increasing numbers of students, the focus of this event was changed to one that stimulated student interaction with peers and academic staff. Everyone present was given a T shirt and marker pens. Most importantly a clear set of instructions was given to the group: they were required to draw representations of their interests on their T shirt and then to circulate, find others with similar interests and form a group. Participants were given firm instructions about the mix of gender and ethnicity of each group, and staff actively intervened to move students out of their ‘comfort zones’. Groups formed in this way later worked together on module-specific group assignments.

5.2.2 Engineering Teams
Since 2009/10 all students in Stage 1 of their degree programme in the School of Mechanical & Systems Engineering (M&SE) have been organised into purposively selected learning teams of five on the first day of semester one. Allocation to Engineering Teams is carried out to ensure that each team’s members have a range of skills and previous academic achievements: no Team consists only of academically high-achieving students or of those with relatively low entry grades. Students joining the course from a Foundation Year and overseas students new to the UK are distributed throughout the Teams. Great care is taken to ensure that female students, who represent a minority group within the School, are in a Team which contains another female student. Wherever possible, consideration is also given to students’ term-time accommodation arrangements in order to promote the possibility of out of university contact. Engineering Teams are encouraged to be self
managing in terms of the organisation of their activities leading to submission of project work within two modules. They are also encouraged to sit together and learn together throughout all modules during the two semesters of Stage 1. A more detailed account is included in Joyce and Hopkins (2011).

5.3 The University of Sunderland
At the University of Sunderland the three first degree programmes listed below were considered relevant for exploring non-continuation amongst local students. These were identified both through qualitative research with staff conducted for an audit of Sunderland’s retention activity in 2009 (Donbavand 2010), and also through research conducted with local students in the early stages of this study. This latter activity established that participating local students were less likely to engage in activities aimed at developing social bonds unless a proven benefit could be demonstrated, or unless it was a requirement of their course. Therefore, it was decided to evaluate existing initiatives within a small number of programmes that combine these features. These points are listed here and then expanded in the sections below.

- BA (Hons) Psychology: Students at all Levels can access course specific social space (the Sandbox Studio), and also experienced the introduction of problem based learning that requires Psychology students to work together in groups
- BA (Hons) Tourism: Students travel in groups for field trips, one of which is compulsory for Level 1 students during induction week
- BA (Hons) Childhood Studies: Students take part in fundraising activities on a voluntary basis raising money for childhood-related charities such as Barnados.

5.3.1 The Sandbox Studio (Psychology)
The Sandbox Studio is a dedicated space within the Psychology Department where Psychology students are encouraged to spend time both socialising and exploring psychological concepts together. It was designed on the initiative of a Principal Lecturer in the Department who obtained the necessary funding. It is equipped with
sofas and cushions, a whiteboard, a DVD player, films, novels, design and architecture magazines, video games and an Xbox plus other psychology-related materials. The aim of providing this space is “to give students a space where they can explore psychology and work together and get more involved – to see the links between psychology and the real world” (Principal Lecturer, Psychology).

5.3.2 Problem based learning (Psychology)
Problem based learning is now fully incorporated from Level 1 of the Psychology degree programme, after being introduced seven years ago at Masters level initially. A specific module has been designed for the first degree programme to ensure students maximise the benefit to be gained from problem based learning. This requires students to work in groups of eight. They work collaboratively on problems and scenarios, receiving guidance and facilitation from academic staff only when necessary. This guidance can include discussing individual contributions to the task for assessment purposes, and in the early stages is more about coaching students through the process.

5.3.3 Field Trips (Tourism)
The Tourism, Hospitality & Events Management Programme organises field trips in students’ first year of study. These range from joint fact-finding expeditions around the local area to trips to major cities including London, Paris, Barcelona, Prague and New York. With the exception of some Level 1 trips which occur during the induction period, fieldtrips are not compulsory because of the financial commitment required. Despite this, many students take part. Students who might miss out for financial reasons can apply for a grant from the Access Learning Fund. This is widely advertised as a potential means of support to take part in the Tourism trips and is widely utilised by the students.

5.3.4 Curriculum related fundraising activities (Childhood Studies)
A number of charitable fundraising activities have been developed within the Childhood Studies degree programme since 2008/9. These aim not only to raise funds for children’s charities but also to provide an environment which encourages the formation of strong peer bonds through collaboration and engagement in enjoyable activities. There is a strong emphasis on enhancing the student experience through promoting a climate that prioritises both fun and learning. A lecturer involved spoke of wishing “to promote a sense of studentship and identity as students – as students on the
programme – as students within the University overall”. The fundraising activities involved in this evaluation included a cake sale, a sponsored walk, a mini-Olympics, white water rafting, a ‘spooky sleep over’ at Newcastle Castle Keep and a ski-athon.

8 Concluding sections

8.1 Implications
This section shows the specific implications of each of our key findings and locates these within the current fluid HE context.

The finding which over-arches all others is that when social and academic aspects of integration are both targeted they support and enhance each other. All the student groups in our study said that they were primarily motivated by their goals and highly prized their academic experience in moving towards these. It became apparent that when students worked together formally or informally on academic projects they developed peer bonds which then led to a high degree of social integration. This social interaction was something that many had dismissed as unimportant initially but came to value through this process. We also found that when students were facilitated by staff in developing strong social bonds this, in turn, led to academic collaboration and enhanced learning.

The three key implications of these findings were that:

- Acceptance of the concept that social and academic integration are reliant upon each other for their fullest effect offers the opportunity for comprehensive institutional strategies for retention

- That the provision of School and institutional support and encouragement for the key role played by academic staff in student integration is essential. Academic staff have a key role to play in providing students with a sense of structure within an academic environment in which social interaction with students and staff is facilitated
Adoption of a student-centred, collaborative team or group approach to learning may require substantial reorganisation of the learning environment including changes in pedagogical practice, assessment and student supervision. This may also require School and institutional support.

We will now consider in more detail these implications and our headline recommendations related to them. Detailed and stepped recommendations are included in Appendix III as tools for wider dissemination and use.

8.1.1 Implication 1: Acceptance of the concept that social and academic integration are reliant upon each other for their fullest effect offers the opportunity for comprehensive institutional strategies for retention

In addition to the inclusion of the findings from our collaborative project within the What works? dissemination process, each partner institution will have an internal dissemination programme. In addition, bringing the findings of our study to the wider HE community will be achieved through publications and conference papers as a means of promoting this understanding amongst a wider HE audience.

8.1.2 Implication 2: That the provision of School and institutional support and encouragement for the key role played by academic staff in student integration is essential. Academic staff have a key role to play in providing students with a sense of structure within an academic environment in which social interaction with students and staff is facilitated

The following are offered as additional, detailed, reflections on this implication based on our research findings:

1. It is necessary to develop an understanding at Programme/School/institutional levels of the transitional needs for direction and structure for the majority of students. It is important develop and awareness that this represents a temporary strategic measure at the point of entry and initial transition to HE.

2. Acceptance of this need will offer opportunities for the development of subject-, Programme- or student group-specific events or activities to provide a sense of structure. The form and content of the activity or event will be most effective if chosen from an understanding of the background and culture of the majority of students.
3. It is important to maintain awareness of the specific needs of sub-groups within the larger student group. This allows for the inclusion of subtle changes to enhance opportunities for inclusion of groups at risk of marginalisation.

3. Part time students, mature students, and mature students who study part time may require special consideration of the timing of events and activities to accommodate their employment or caring commitments.

4. Consideration should be given to providing local and mature students with opportunities for peer group interaction in a context within which they are able to recognise academic benefits for themselves in investing academically and socially with peers.

5. At degree programme level it will be necessary to develop shared understandings between academic and other staff about the need to act in a unified (Programme-specific) way to promote interaction between students in a manner which enhances their sense of continuity, security and purpose.

6. Practical implications related to the event or activity will require specific consideration, for example finding space within a crowded induction timetable, an appropriate physical space and also the provision of financial and other resources.

Further reflections on bringing about these enhancements are offered in our stepped recommendations (Appendix III).

8.1.3 Implication 3: Adoption of a student-centred, collaborative team or group approach to learning may require substantial reorganisation of the learning environment including changes in pedagogical practice, assessment and student supervision. This may also require School and institutional support. The concept of collaborative working is far from new and there is a substantial body of literature on the subject of the benefits of collaborative learning environments (Kuh et al., 2006; Zepke and Leach, 2010) and an understanding that “learning occurs in social contexts” (Hughes, 2010).

It is acknowledged that there are potential challenges which may be encountered when learning is organised around team/group approaches. Suggestions from our
research for pre-empting and minimising the occurrence of these are included in this section.

The following are offered as additional, detailed, reflections on this implication based on our research findings. Detailed and stepped recommendations are included in Appendix III.

1. It will be necessary for consideration to be given at subject and degree programme level to the type of group work or team work which is most appropriate in the context of a given degree programme, and how the chosen approach is to be integrated with existing pedagogies and teaching strategies.

2. Group and team integration carries specific implications for any student group who may view themselves or be viewed by others as ‘different’. The implication at subject, Programme and module level is a need to develop an awareness of the existence of any groups at risk of marginalisation. The development of agreed strategies which target these students’ additional integration needs throughout induction processes, and as they navigate their way through the complexities of team formation and functioning, may be necessary.

3. Transition to the use of a team/group approach may require additional staff time and resources in the preparation and adaptation of course materials and assessments.

4. In moving to a team/group approach there are implications at both module and School level in developing a core strategy which can be consistently applied to how teams/groups achieve support and how difficulties in team dynamics or functioning may be supported without compromising these students’ development of self-regulatory skills.

8.1.4 The role of the institution in supporting and facilitating staff in their work of engaging students and promoting their academic and social integration

Although this issue is not one of our key findings it is important to consider the role of structures within the institution in facilitating change. Members of academic and other staff interviewed as part of our study noted the necessity of receiving sanction
and encouragement at institution and degree programme level to proceed with their proposed initiatives.

The ability of organisations to be even-handed in implicitly and explicitly valuing both excellence in research and teaching will transmit a clear message to academic staff about priorities and how they should allocate the scare resource of their time. Those with academic, social and economic power within a university have the ability to define the discourses which are privileged within that organisation and which determine the organisational culture (Campbell, 2000). The 2011 Education White Paper ‘Students at the Heart of the System’ has put considerable emphasis on universities being able to deliver an enhanced student experience and this encouragement will also play a part in defining institutional priorities.

In our study the staff and academics who undertook or evaluated measures to increase student integration were enthusiastic and prepared to actively intervene in challenging boundaries and forging links. They were all to some extent ‘special’. They were prepared to go above and beyond their roles in the service of their students and may not be representative of the whole academic community.

Staff participants in our mid-point evaluation made comments about their relative ability or inability to influence their students’ learning environment. One spoke of colleagues’ scepticism about new pedagogical practice and also commented that:

“I think to be brutally honest, most of the staff here feel overworked and over-burdened and they have got enough to do anyway without even making those changes or even thinking about them.”

Being in a position of academic power was also commented upon by a senior academic in another University:

“When I first floated the idea I was prepared for a lot of obvious unease about it, if not resistance. I think I benefited from two things – one I was very new here and two that I have a senior position......whether I would get away with it next year or two years time now that they know me better is another matter entirely but, no, everyone was very, very supportive!”

The use of students as monitors of the teaching performance of new academics in the US (Mroz 2011, p.5) suggests a move towards according a higher value to the voice of the student body. Students within this study told us about the things which helped them to gain a sense of integration. They noted not only the interlinking
between their academic and their social experiences but also the importance of staff in facilitating this.

The implications which arise from our key findings are multi-layered and range from suggestions for simple, cost-effective, integration-focused strategies to the reorganisation of degree programmes to accommodate team or group working, where these do not already exist. The role of the institution in recognising the need for changes which further support student integration, and in offering implicit and explicit support to staff, is perhaps the most fundamental of our recommendations.

10.3 Appendix III: Tools for wider dissemination and use

10.3.2 Stepped recommendations as checklists for practice

Recommendation 1: Encourage early interaction between students within an activity-based, structured academic environment

We recommend that every degree programme should engage all students in an activity-based social event at the earliest point possible. This event should go beyond a ‘meet and greet’ social gathering in that it is predominantly interactive and highly structured by staff.

Checklist of recommendations

In support of this recommendation we offer these stepped recommendations to stimulate reflection and discussion, and not as a prescribed list.

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<th>Checklist item</th>
<th>Notes on action taken/to be taken</th>
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<tr>
<td>• How will the importance of attending the event be communicated to students? Is it possible to include it as a mandatory requirement of the course?</td>
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<td>• Students who view themselves as ‘shy’ may be reticent about attending because of social anxiety and may</td>
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need to be reassured that although they will be asked to interact with others, they will be supported in doing so.

1. What is the best method of communicating this message to students in your subject area at the point where you have not had the opportunity of establishing who will experience a social event as challenging?

- Some student groups, particularly mature or local students, appear to be more likely to adopt a purely functional approach to their degree programme and view it as an opportunity for knowledge acquisition only.

1. How far has it been possible to include a clear academic focus within the activity-based social event which will give those students most likely to adopt this approach a clear rationale for attending and participating?

- In considering the size of room/space (if appropriate) which you will need for the event/activity, have you considered the following:
  1. Number of students and staff?
  2. Does the space allow those present to circulate free?
  3. Whether the amount of space needed for the event/activity planned must also accommodate equipment or display materials which are to be used?

- The choice of event/activity should be specifically chosen for its applicability to course content and student group.
(1) Has careful consideration at programme level been given to the choice of an activity appropriate to both course content and student group(s)?

(2) How will the chosen activity facilitate interaction between students and between students and staff?

(3) Is there an agreement about the circumstances in which staff will intervene to encourage students to move from within their accustomed social comfort zone and how this will be done?

- We would recommend that staff involved in a Programme should discuss and plan strategies for the inclusion of potentially marginalised groups into the activity/event.

  (1) Within the context of the specific Programme, is it possible to identify student groups who represent ‘minorities’ or who have the potential to become marginalised?

  (2) What strategies currently exist within the programme for the inclusion of these students and which new strategies might it be appropriate to adopt?

- Is there a clear understanding amongst Programme staff about how the activity/event fits with the rest of the degree programme?

  (1) If the activity has been to form teams or groups of any kind, how will these be used?
(2) If the activity has involved production of an object/objects, how will these be used within the programme?

Recommendation 2 – Engaging students in collaborative learning as part of teams or groups or using specific approaches such as Problem Based Learning.

Checklist of recommendations:

We recommend that consideration is given to the amenability of the module and programme content to a collaborative learning approach and that, where possible, this is adopted. Preparation of students to take part in collaborative learning is essential to its success.

In support of this recommendation we offer these stepped recommendations to stimulate reflection and discussion, and not as a prescribed list.

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<th>Checklist item</th>
<th>Notes on action taken/to be taken</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Staff at programme level should have a clear understanding about whether students are being asked to work as part of teams* or groups**1. We suggest that this choice will be informed by both the tasks students are asked to do, and by the culture and structures of the subject area. Further areas for consideration include the number of contact hours, and assignment structures.</td>
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1 A team is here defined and understood as a number of people working interdependently towards a common goal. Team members may be selected for the complementarity of their skills. A group is here defined as a number of people working together but often independently towards a common purpose.
1. Will the team/group be short term (for example throughout one module) or longer term (throughout an academic year)?
2. What will be the focus of the group/team? Will it complete a project or other assessed work? Is the purpose specific to your subject/discipline?
3. If there are minority groupings within the student cohort, how will their specific social and/or academic needs be accommodated in the process of allocation to teams?

- The allocation of students to groups/teams will depend upon the subject area and also the type of work or project which they are to undertake.
  (1) Are students made aware prior to entry to their degree programme that they will be expected to work collaboratively with their peers? How is this information communicated to them?
  (2) What form of team/group allocation will provide a ‘best fit’ for the subject area or project? (options include student self selection; structured allocation to ensure distribution of skills and characteristics; random allocation by staff)

- It is important to pay attention to the formation of teams/groups and their understanding of responsibilities within the team/group.
  1. How will the process of team building be facilitated within the induction process?
  2. What method will be used to ensure that all team/group members understand their
responsibilities towards the team/group, how to manage tasks, and how feedback on the team’s/group’s progress will be communicated within the group/team?

3. What arrangements will be made to provide support to teams and groups and how will these arrangements be communicated to team members?

| • The knowledge that staff support is available if required is essential to the healthy functioning of teams. |
| (1) Will it be better to utilise an existing system of student support or to organise a new system? |
| (2) To what degree will students be expected to deal with problematic team/group dynamics independently before accessing staff support? |
| (3) How are students expected to notify staff of their need for support? |

| • Team and group projects/assessed work should be specifically formulated to accommodate a team/group working approach. |
| (1) Will it be possible to modify an existing project/assignment or will it be necessary to design one which is team/group specific? |
| (2) What factors, specific to the degree programme, will it be necessary to consider in the design of the assessed work? |

| • The most frequent student complaint about team or group work is when team members’ contributions are perceived to be unequal. |
| (1) What system will the programme use to ensure that |
team members’ efforts are reflected in the mark awarded?

(2) Is a system of team process reports appropriate within your subject area or are you aware of any other systems to help ensure fairness in mark distribution?

- Team and group working approaches should be constantly evaluated in response to student and staff feedback and in the context of course and curriculum changes.

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