FREE COFFEE AND CAKE! A RETENTION INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE FIRST YEAR BUSINESS SCHOOL STUDENTS' SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH THEIR PEERS AND STAFF.

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the findings from a small case study which involved implementing a social initiative with year 1 students on retention 'hotspot' programmes in the Business School. Financed by the internal TLA fund, this initiative involved running four coffee and cake events over an academic year specifically for students on the hotspot programmes. The purpose of these events was to facilitate student interaction with other students and lecturers in the department, to promote social engagement, connectedness to the department and feelings of belonging. With increasing tuition fees and the tendency for students to live off campus, many students attend only formal timetabled teaching events and do not engage in additional activities. Arguably therefore, not all students fully connect to the university or department, thus affecting their feelings of belonging. A sense of belonging appears repeatedly in the literature as contributing towards student retention. Students and staff took part in an evaluation of the coffee and cake events in April 2012 and this paper discusses the findings. Results showed that the coffee and cake events contributed towards students' feelings of belonging and made students feel valued. In particular, students particularly benefited from the liaisons with staff in a more relaxed, non-teaching environment.

Key words: retention; belonging; student engagement; commuter students

Introduction

Background

This article details an evaluation of a small retention initiative aimed at enhancing the social engagement of students within the university department. It was hoped that this initiative would contribute towards improved student retention rates on the business school retention hotspot courses. In general, student retention and success is a current and high profile concept for all UK higher education institutions. In the UK, the introduction of the Key Information Sets (KIS) in 2012, alongside pre-existing league tables are making information more accessible to students and other stakeholders. With the higher tuition fee structure, students may have an increased impetus for thoroughly researching and reviewing university and course data, which may also include student completion figures i.e. retention rates. The higher fees structure also means that universities are now more than ever concerned with providing a superlative student experience as students come to expect more from their student experience (Thomas, 2012). Improving retention rates is therefore a key component of many UK university strategies and lies at the heart of departmental approaches.

This issue is not confined to the UK; retention is a focus for universities worldwide. For example, van Stolk et al. (2007) reported on how higher education institutions in other countries govern student retention. Researching practices in Australia, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United States, the authors established that all countries had implemented policies and procedures for improving and monitoring student retention to some extent. Whilst these countries differed in their specific approaches, Stolk et al. (2007) concluded on their unified commitment to improving student retention.

Retention rates vary amongst educational institutions and whilst the UK appears to be performing well against other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Countries (NAO, 2007), there is still scope for improvement. For example, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reports that the average UK retention rate for the year 2009-10 was 89.3%. However, more recent research

undertaken by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE What Works? Student Retention & Success programme revealed that anywhere from 33% to 42% of students contemplate withdrawing from their higher education (Thomas 2012).

There are numerous factors pertaining to retention and success; previous academic grades, incorrect course chosen, personal circumstances, attainment and achievement, academic and social integration, availability of support, attitudes toward higher education, institutional "fit", alongside financial, health and well-being factors (Tinto 1975; Bers & Smith 1991; Braunstein et al. 2006; Longden 2006; Jeffreys 2007; Yorke & Longden 2008; Bennett & Kane 2010; Harding 2011; Thomas 2012). Whilst all of these have an influence on student retention, some have a more profound impact than others. For example Bers & Smith (1991) found that social integration significantly influenced student retention rates in comparison to other factors. Furthermore, findings from the seven projects undertaken as part of the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme, show that social integration was a key area for retention and success. Although achieved in different ways, enhancing student's social integration into higher education was a salient feature across the seven project updates (Thomas, 2012). Bennett & Kane (2009) also support this finding and concluded from their review of the literature that offering students good social and recreational activities during their degree, increases the quality of a students' experience, which again links to improved retention rates.

A study conducted in tertiary education in New Zealand also highlighted a sense of belonging as one of the attributes linked to student participation. A higher sense of belonging was found in successful students and therefore institutional culture had an impact upon retention and success (Anae et al. 2002 cited in van der Meer, 2010). Social integration is therefore a major consideration when addressing student retention.

What is social integration?

Embroiled within social integration is a students' feeling of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). A feeling of belonging reportedly aids student attachment, engagement and attitudes towards university life, hence why it is often positively

correlated with retention. According to Thomas (2012), student belonging involves both academic and social belonging and encompasses feelings of acceptance, inclusion, fitting in and being valued. Hoffman et al. (2002) identify two types of belonging; 'student-to-peer' and 'student-to-faculty'. Students can feel a sense of belonging to other students and consequently feel as though they belong to a student group. In addition, students can also build an attachment to the department and staff and feel as though they belong to the departmental community. There are therefore different levels in which students feel they belong during their time at university.

Work undertaken by Dorum et al. (2010) ascertained that students particularly value feelings of belonging to their institution or department. They surveyed 370 year 1 students who revealed that 'the intimacy of the institution and its staff' was of significant importance to their higher education experience. Furthermore, students are more likely to feel valued by staff if lecturers know their names and exhibit other signs of friendship. This friendliness results in increased academic motivation and also increases the likelihood that students will approach staff about resolving problems (Thomas, 2002).The more likely students are to approach tutors about their concerns, the more likely these are to be rectified, which could contribute towards student retention.

There are a variety of approaches to take when enhancing student sense of belonging. Thomas (2012:7) outlines four steps to achieve student belonging. Firstly is the need to create supportive peer relations. Secondly, there needs to be meaningful interaction between staff and students. Thirdly, is the need to develop knowledge, confidence and identity in the student. Finally, the university experience should be relevant to students' interests and future goals. As a sense of belonging is believed to underpin retention and success, once students have achieved a sense of belonging, retention and success should therefore improve.

Qualitative data from the seven projects which comprised the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme, reported that feelings of isolation and not fitting in were amongst the fundamental reasons why a student would contemplate leaving university (Thomas, 2012). Tinto's (1975) model asserts that students who engage in formal and informal academic and social integration experiences are less likely to

leave their institution. Encouraging students to engage in available social integration experiences is therefore recommended. This encouragement should also occur early on in a student's time at university to help individuals feel connected from an early stage. This early intervention could provide students with an approachable peer and staff support network alongside developing feelings of being valued, engaged, dedicated and motivated. All of these elements contribute towards retaining students (Osterman, 2000; Schofield & Dismore, 2010).

However, a major obstacle in facilitating social integration and a sense of belonging is an increasing trend for students to live at home rather than on campus. Those students who stay at home and commute into university encounter more barriers to engagement. HESA data demonstrates that in the mid-1980's on average, 8 per cent of undergraduate students lived at home. This figure has amplified over the decades and the number of students living at home now stands at around 20 per cent (HEFCE, 2009). This figure however, is for those studying on a full time basis and does not include part time students.

These commuter students pose a conundrum for those seeking to increase retention rates via increased social belonging. Research by the University of Liverpool found that those students who lived at home engaged less in university social activities when compared to their campus residence counterparts. Whilst the research reveals that students compensate by engaging more in non-university activities, students who live at home face more difficulties in making friends, integrating with university culture, feelings of belonging and overall general engagement in university life (Patiniotis & Holdsworth, 2005). The research concludes therefore that living at home can be detrimental to student social integration and engagement

Given the interlinking relationships between social integration, feelings of belonging, engagement and retention, closer attention was paid to providing a social element specifically for the five year 1 retention 'hotspot' programmes within the business school; the coffee and cake social events. The purpose of the coffee and cake social events, whilst primarily ingrained in retention interests, was multi-faceted.

Research Objectives

Five year 1 programmes within the business school have been categorised as retention 'hotspot' courses, meaning that these five particular courses have been pre-identified as having attrition problems. Whilst identifying the problem is straightforward, ascertaining a solution is less so. An action research approach was therefore commenced to assess a practical solution to the retention problem. The objective of this project therefore was to facilitate social integration of students with their peers and tutors on the retention hotspot courses by running the free coffee and cake social events. This project aimed to address the following research questions:

1. Can the coffee and cake events promote students' social integration and therefore aid a sense of belonging?
2. Is this an effective exercise in improving student retention for these hotspot students?

To finance this initiative, a bid for £400 was made to an internal Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) fund. The TLA fund is an element of the university's student experience group who provide funding for a range of activities that contribute towards meeting the objectives of the University's Learning & Teaching Strategy.

The bid was approved which covered the catering costs of hosting four coffee and cake events spread over the academic year 2011/12 (i.e. once every other month). This meant that the coffee and cake sessions were free for the students and staff to attend.

What are the coffee and cake social events?

The coffee and cake events were to provide a social element to studying in the department. The events provided a place for students to meet peers, their lecturers and other departmental staff, outside of formal teaching sessions. This social interaction and engagement was hoped to facilitate students' feelings of belonging to

the community of business students and also to build their affiliation and connectedness to their department.

The subject discipline basis of these coffee and cake events provided a place for students to interact and identify with other business school students as well as their tutors. Bennett & Kane (2010) looked at the different characteristics of universities with high and low business school retention rates. Those with higher retention rates adopted a more subject based approach, in particular to personal tutoring, where the aim was for students to interact closely with a staff member in their department. The coffee and cake events also contained a subject based approach as this is believed to maximise feelings of belonging.

During the academic year 2011/12, four bi-monthly coffee and cake sessions were held; October, December, February and April. All students on the five business school retention hotspot programmes were invited, along with the relevant year 1 course leaders, lecturers and student support staff. Each event lasted 2 hours and activities were provided to encourage students to interact and engage with other students and staff. Party style refreshments were provided, including but not exclusive to, coffee and cake. In addition, an electronic quiz, paper based activities and a Nintendo Wii was set up so that students had a range of activities to choose from. Other activities were also trialled at the events, including a belly dancing workshop and providing henna Mehndi body art, to offer a diverse range of activities for students and staff to get involved in.

The location of the events was also considered. The first three events were held in a business school meeting room but after student suggestions for a more student friendly environment, the final session took place in the Student Union.
Timing of the events was another consideration. Each of the four events took place on different days and at different times to ensure students were provided with various options to suit their timetables.

Methodology and Method

Action Research

The initiative within this small case study was aimed to be the start of an action research project, addressing the issue of student retention in the case of five year 1 programmes in one business school. Action research is a continuous reflective process whilst problem solving to better understand the underlying issues. Once identified, a problem is addressed and changes are actively put in place to improve the situation, whilst researching the process and results. What differentiates action research from other forms of research is its focus upon the interaction between action and research. Ultimately, this interplay continues until the desired effect has been achieved (Blumberg et al. 2008). This is therefore an iterative process firstly involving actions, observations then reflections of this before revising the plans and making new actions, upon which more observations and reflections occur (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

This project therefore details the very beginnings of the action research process. The problem of student retention on five year 1 business school programmes had been identified. As the literature highlights a sense of belonging as something prevalent in those who are retained, this research set out to implement and assess a possible intervention involving coffee and cake social events. This paper details the first stage evaluation of the coffee and cake initiative. The findings and reflections of this initiative will feed in to future and subsequent plans, in accordance with the action research model. Although this project is still in its infancy, this does not mean that the results of this project are not useful to others seeking to improve retention. Some, if not all, of the issues raised in this paper may be applicable to other scholars seeking a way to further understand student retention.

Evaluating the coffee and cake social events

Informal feedback was received from both staff and students throughout the academic year, however, a formal evaluation of these coffee and cake sessions took place in April after the last event. An online evaluation survey was created and emailed to all the students who had attended at least one of the four coffee and cake sessions. The evaluation survey elicited both qualitative and quantitative data. The

qualitative element of the questionnaire was to gather views about student's beliefs, feelings and experiences of the coffee and cake sessions. The quantitative element of the questionnaire sought student characteristics (e.g. gender and course) and also contained attitude scales whereby students rated statements about the events.

The student evaluation survey was undertaken anonymously to reduce participant bias. Students were aware that the researcher was also the organiser of the events and therefore may have felt a need to respond in a positive manner. Thus by making the evaluation anonymous, it was hoped that students would provide a more accurate reflection of their opinions.

In addition, staff who had attended at least one of the social events were also asked to feedback on the coffee and cake sessions. These staff were emailed a short survey consisting of open questions which sought their views on the coffee and cake sessions.

This evaluation was to assess the merit of the coffee and cake social events by obtaining feedback from the students and staff for whom the initiative was directly aimed at.

Participants

Staff and students across the five year 1 retention hotspot programmes were invited to attend each of the four coffee and cake social events held over the academic year 2011/12.

The student cohort

The student cohort comprised of those year 1 students on the five retention hotspot programmes in the business school; Accounting, Accounting and Finance, Business Administration, Business Studies and Business and Management. In total, there were 588 year 1 students on these five hotspot programmes for the year 2011/12.

These programmes also have higher numbers of students living at home (and therefore commute into the university) compared to the average rate of 20% given by HESA and HEFCE. Chart 1 below illustrates the percentages of students who declared their term time address as their parental or guardian home and commute in to the university.

Chart 1. Per cent of students on the Year 1 retention hotsport courses who live at home
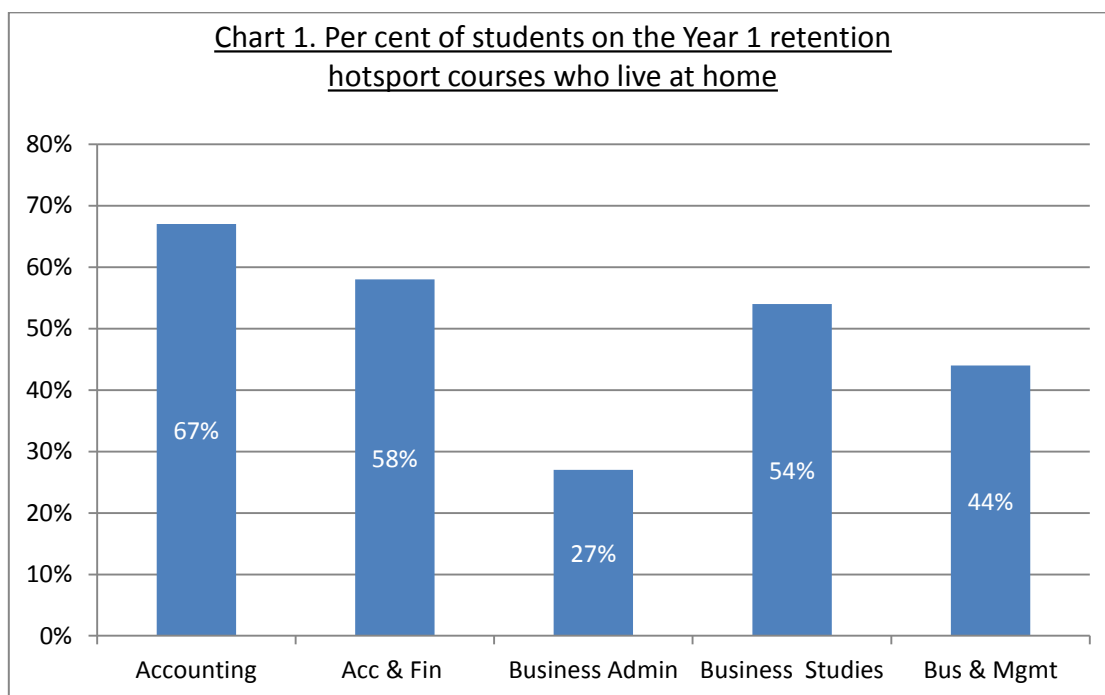
As displayed in chart 1, the year 1 Accounting programme had the highest number of students living in either their parental or guardian home. The lowest number was seen amongst year 1 Business Administration students. Interestingly, all of these figures are higher than the 20% average figure offered by HESA and HEFCE, however chart 1 does include part time students in the figures. On average therefore, 51% of the students live at home and commute into university across the 5 retention hotspot programmes.

The Year 1 staff

All staff involved with year 1 hotspot students were invited to attend the coffee and cake social events. Module tutors, course leaders, division leaders and the Dean of the school were all invited to attend. All members of the business school student support team were also invited which included support tutors, administrative officers

and the student liaison officer. A variety of staff therefore, who would liaise with first year students throughout the duration of their studies were invited to attend the coffee and cake sessions.

Findings and Discussion

Student attendance at the coffee and cake social events

A total of 42 students across the five retention hotspot courses attended at least one of the four coffee and cake social events. The total number of students comprising the five retention hotspot courses equated to 588 students; therefore only 7% of these students attended a coffee and cake event. The uptake was much lower than expected, however even with small numbers there was some diversity amongst the students who attended. Chart 2 overleaf provides a breakdown of the 42 students who attended at least one of the four coffee and cake events:

Chart 2. Students who attended at least one coffee and cake event
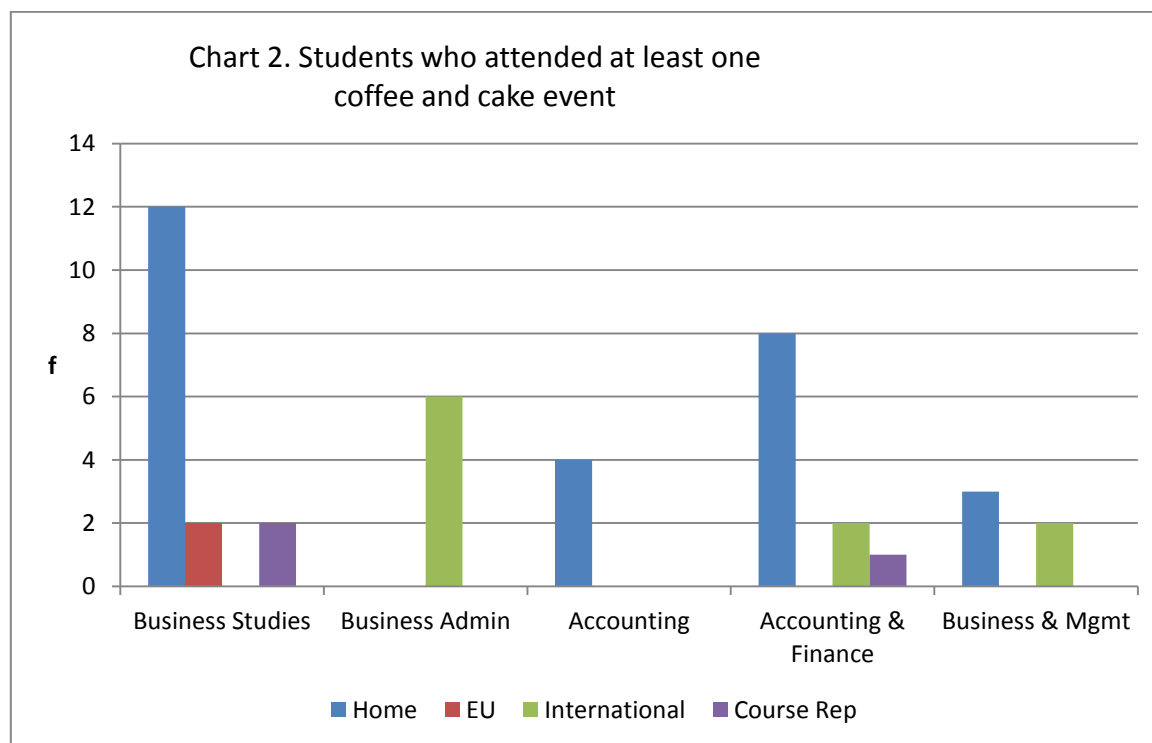
As shown above, although it was predominately the home students who attended the coffee and cake sessions, some courses were more heavily represented by international students (Business Administration) and only two EU students attended at least of one the sessions. Surprisingly, only 3 of the possible 10 course representatives attended a coffee and cake session. As course representatives tend

to be amongst the most engaged students, it was anticipated that more of these students would have attended the social events. With regards to the gender of the students attending, there were slightly more females who attended than males. Out of the 42 students who attended, 19 were male and 23 were female.

Despite overall numbers of students attending being low, the majority of students attended more than one coffee and cake event which is detailed in table 1 below:

Table 1. The number of total coffee and cake social events the students attended

	Number of total coffee and cake events attended			
	One	Two	Three	Four
Number of students	14	17	11	0

As the table overleaf shows, 14 students attended only one event, however, 17 students attended two events and 11 students attended three events. Overall therefore, 28 students attended two or three of the social events. No students attended all four events.

Staff attendance at the coffee and cake social events

Including the researcher, 15 members of staff attended at least one of the coffee and cake events. In terms of gender split, 8 of the staff who attended were males and 7 were females. The majority of staff attended more than one session which is demonstrated in table 2 below:

Table 2. The number of coffee and cake social events attended by staff

	Number of coffee and cake events attended			
	One	Two	Three	Four
Number of students	4	4	2	5

As identified in table 2 above, four members of staff attended one event, four members of staff attended two events, two members of staff attended three events and five members of staff attended four events. Overall therefore, 11 members of staff attended more than two of the coffee and cake events.

Reflections on attendance

It was originally anticipated than more than 42 students would have engaged with the coffee and cake social events and therefore this number is perceived as a low uptake. However, as the majority of students attended more than one event, it is therefore evident that these students saw value in attending these sessions. There is an emerging trend that once students had attended one coffee and cake event, they were more likely to attend future coffee and cake events.

More effort therefore is required to encourage students to attend an initial event, as the trend suggests that this would then result in students engaging more in subsequent events. With regards to the low attendance, feedback from the student evaluation highlighted that the timing of the events was a large concern. One year 1 course representative detailed that:

> From students that didn't attend, all I have heard is that the time was not suitable for them and that they wish they could have attended

The timing of the events therefore was an issue. Finding a suitable slot for all students to attend across five year 1 programmes was problematic. For this reason, the day and time was altered for each coffee and cake event to provide a range of days and times which students would hopefully be able to fit in around their timetable. This included one lunch time slot, one afternoon slot and two week day evening sessions.

It was also interesting to see that only three of the ten course representatives were in attendance at these events. As course representatives tend to be amongst the most engaged students, it was anticipated that these students would have held more of a presence at these events.

In contrast to the student attendance, the staff attendance was higher than initially estimated. Staff were in support of the activities and their attendance at the events reflected this, demonstrated by five members of staff attending all of the coffee and cake events. Feedback from the staff evaluation highlighted their desire to interact with their students outside of formal teaching time and in a relaxed environment:

> I really enjoyed the events and found it a really good way for lecturers and students to communicate with each other in an informal way. I found it particularly useful as I engaged with students who I would not normally have much of an opportunity to speak to individually due to the large size of the class
>
> Lecturer in Accounting

> A really good chance for the students to interact with the school on a social level. Giving the student a chance to talk outside of lectures to their tutors about topics they would not normally have the chance to discuss
>
> Student Liaison Officer

> These events for the students play a significant part in achieving student engagement and potentially retention. It is my experience that when students are able to contextualize their individual role within a wider community setting they become more confident in their engagement with university activities
>
> Senior Lecturer in Business

As the coffee and cake social events provided a space for lecturers to interact with their students, building stronger rapports and encouraging engagement, staff seized the opportunity to come along.

One final reflection relating to the attendance surrounds the marketing and publicising of the events. Several staff members highlighted how the marketing of the events may have impacted negatively upon student attendance. Staff were often pleasantly surprised by the organisation of the events, by the variety of food on offer and by the planned activities and pursuits available. Staff commented that the term

'coffee and cake' inadvertently downplayed the social events giving instead a more simplistic impression comparable to 'tea and biscuits'. This image may not appeal to students and hence possibly goes some way to explain why attendance was poor. It would also explain why students were inclined to attend more than one event. Once the students had attended one event, they were more likely to attend another; therefore if the 'coffee and cake' title elicited low expectations, these would have been surpassed when experiencing the event, thus correcting their image of the coffee and cake events. This may explain why students were more likely to return for future events if they had attended a prior event.

However, a deeper look at the student perceptions of the coffee and cake social events is needed to fully understand their views. The student evaluation survey goes some way to reflect the student perception which is discussed next.

Findings from the student evaluation survey

Immediately after the final coffee and cake social event (April 2012), an evaluation survey was distributed to all of the 42 students who had attended at least one of these social events. Of these 42 students, 16 students completed the evaluation survey. This resulted in a 38.1% response rate which included students across all of the five retention hotspot courses; Accounting, Accounting and Finance, Business Administration, Business Studies and Business and Management.

Overall, the feedback from these students about the coffee and cake social events was very positive. All 16 of the respondents reported that they would like the social events to continue next year and many students also made recommendations for supplementing the coffee and cake events with bigger affairs such as a Christmas party or summer ball. The students' desire for organised social events within the department was therefore apparent.

The two original research questions will now be revisited to discuss the responses to the evaluation survey.

Research question 1: Can the coffee and cake sessions promote students' social integration?

The survey asked students to rate several attitude statements on whether attending the coffee and cake social events helped their feelings of belonging. Chart 3 overleaf summarises the responses to these statements.

Chart 3. How did the year 1 coffee and cake events help students' feelings of belonging?
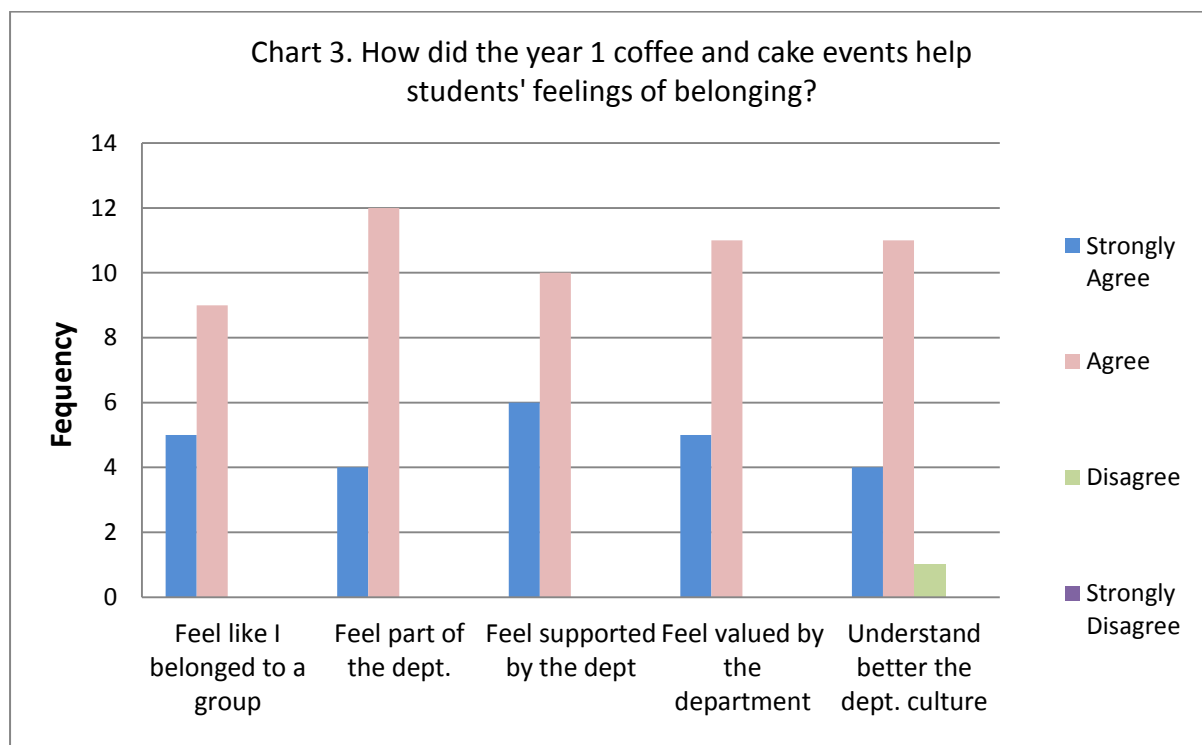
All of the responding students either agreed or strongly agreed that the coffee and cake social events helped them to feel like they belong to a group, feel part of the department and feel supported and valued by the department. All but one student felt that they better understood the culture of the department as a result of the coffee and cake social events. With regards to developing students' feelings of belonging and feelings of value and support, many students comments on this:

It helped me to get to know my tutors well and they made me feel that I am an important part   Accounting and Finance student

Before them [the coffee and cake events], I did not know Accounting was part of the business school   Accounting and Finance student

It was nice to do something with the business school as one unit

Accounting student

Meeting the tutors, to know them on a social scale making them more approachable in an academic sense, therefore enjoying my time more here at uclan   Business Studies student

Got to meet new people and got to know some lecturers when not teaching. Helped me to get more of an insight into the department and its culture

Business and Management student

The people from each social event were all part of the group within the business school and it made me feel more a part of it

Accounting and Finance student

I really enjoyed them and believe they are highly valuable for all students. It allowed us to ask our module tutors, in a different light, any little concerns we had. It allowed me to make new friends and feel part of the business school rather than just a number on the books   Business Studies student

Students were also asked to comment on how they feel now as a result of attending the coffee and cake social events over the academic year. Chart 4 below illustrates the student responses:

Chart 4. How do students feel as a result of attending the coffee and cake sessions?
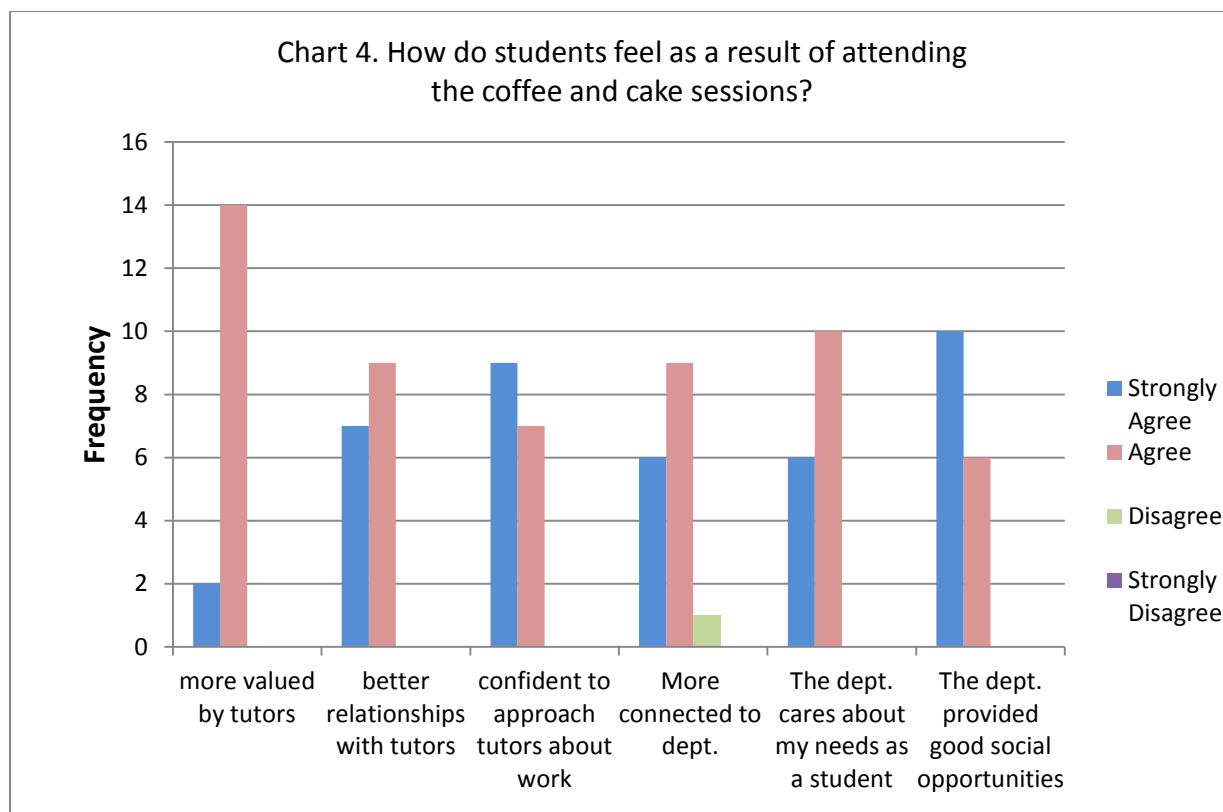
All of the students who responded either strongly agreed or agreed that they feel more valued by tutors, have a better relationship with tutors and feel more confident in approaching tutors about academic work. In addition students also felt more cared for by the department and connected to the department.

The responses to the statements and the qualitative comments highlight two significant areas in which students benefited from attending the coffee and cake sessions. Firstly, students appreciated a space to speak with their tutors and get to know the staff better. As staff took time to attend the social events and interact with students away from formal teaching time, this made student's feel more valued and important. As the events had a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, students felt more at ease speaking to tutors, which broke down barriers and made tutors more approachable. A second benefit reflected in the student feedback is a more general gain that students made in feeling included and connected to a wider group within the business school. Students felt important (not just a number) and felt a part of something. The coffee and cake social events, for most students, also introduced them to the culture of the department and offered an insight into the department's ethos and values. Albeit a small number, for these particular students, all of these

elements combined have enhanced their social integration into the department by improving their feelings of value, importance, connectedness and belonging.

Research question 2: Is this an effective exercise in improving student retention for these hotspot students?

The second question this research set out to address concerned the use of the coffee and cake social events as an effective exercise in improving student retention for these particular students.

Given that this is such a small case study, research question 2 is difficult to answer and generalisations cannot be made. However, all of the 42 students who attended the coffee and cake social events have been retained. Questions do arise over whether these students may have been retained anyway, without the use of the coffee and cake initiative.

A point worth noting however, is that several students turned up to the events on their own and were introduced to other students upon arrival; therefore it was not always group of students coming together in existing friendship groups. The coffee and cake social events addressed many elements identified in the literature as linking to retention (feelings of belonging, feeling valued and feeling connected to the department) and therefore in theory, it is hoped that the social events did contribute towards improved feelings of belonging which then influenced retention rates for those students who took part.

However, on reflection more information needs to be collected from the students either by interview or focus group discussions, to delve deeper into whether the coffee and cake initiative did impact positively upon their retention.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although this was a small study, there were some promising results that were produced from the trailing of the coffee and cake initiative. The evaluations highlighted that both students and staff alike valued the events and much was

gained in terms of enhancing students' feelings of belonging, which the literature links to student retention. However, the issue of student attendance was a limiting factor in this project. Students have to attend in order to achieve these benefits and therefore efforts need to be concentrated on attracting students and getting students initially engaged in the social events.

There were two main points of interest raised; firstly this study provides a meaningful insight into student desires for more social events within their university department. Students reported that they would like more of these social activities and for these to also be on a grander scale. Secondly, the involvement of staff was extremely positive and supports that staff want to engage more with their students whilst at university.

Adhering to the action research model, this evaluation provides the initial part of the iterative process. Following from this evaluation and reflections, the plans for future social activities will be revised accordingly before implementing the actions for the next academic year. It is anticipated that next year students will have move involvement in the design and organisation of these social events and the name 'coffee and cake' will be replaced in favour of one which more adequately reflects the nature of the events. In addition to this revised marketing approach, the timing of the events must also be considered. Whilst the timing of social events to suit staff and students across five programmes is always going to be problematic, this is a crucial first step to encouraging students to attend. If this first step is done correctly and the marketing is also improved, it is hoped that student uptake of these events would increase.

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