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Anglia Ruskin  
University

# **A comparative evaluation of the roles of student adviser and personal tutor in relation to undergraduate student retention**

## **Final report**

**Anglia Ruskin University**

Authors:

Jacqui McCary, Sheila Pankhurst, Helen Valentine  
and Angela Berry

July 2011

**What Works?** Student Retention & Success



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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This report is a project output from Anglia Ruskin University, as part of the '*What works? Student retention and success programme*'. In 2008, Anglia Ruskin University bid successfully for funding of £73,000 from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) to carry out a study investigating the impact of the roles of non-academic Student Advisers and 'traditional' academic Personal Tutors in relation to undergraduate retention. Our research was prompted by concerns and issues raised by the 2007 National Audit Office report, 'Staying the Course' (NAO, 2007) and the follow-up House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts report on student retention (CPA, 2008). Both these reports identified that students feel that academic and pastoral support is limited and does not fully meet their needs.

Of the two roles, the Personal Tutor role is widespread, if variable in operation, across a range of HEIs (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993) and can have a positive impact on student retention (Davies and Elias, 2003). The provision of non-academic Student Advisers, however, is a recent development which has been thoroughly and positively evaluated at Anglia Ruskin (Wilson, 2006) and has been disseminated externally via conference papers, but has not yet been widely taken up across the sector.

From the start of this project, we were keen to obtain insights from our joint venture (JV) partners. We regarded input from our JV students as particularly valuable, since our partner centres reflect a milieu often perceived as more supportive than mainstream university culture.

One of the main aims of our project was to identify the student's perspective on what help they require when they experience difficulties: who they require this help from, and when they require it. We also looked at the factors that caused students to consider leaving university, and the sources and types of support within and outside our university which influenced their decision to stay.

## **Anglia Ruskin University**

Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) is a large HEI with (at the start of our study) about 24,000 students and two main campuses in Cambridge and Chelmsford, as well as a smaller campus in Peterborough and Fulbourn. It has a student population characterised by large numbers of mature, part-time students, many with non-traditional backgrounds. Over recent years, we have adjusted our regional focus away from having many small FE partners to fewer but larger joint venture (JV) relationships. Consistency of higher education (HE) experience across all of Anglia Ruskin, including the JV partners, is a key aspiration for us.

The most recent HESA data (2009/2010) shows that our retention rates have steadily increased over the last three years and we are now better than our benchmark. However, our performance against HESA retention benchmarks prior to 2007 was a cause for concern. To address this, Anglia Ruskin established a working group in 2007 to consider all aspects of student retention. The working group's recommendations and a wide range of actions were instigated from September 2008 for the academic year 2008/09.

### **Methodology**

Our study was one of the smaller projects among a total of seven funded by the 'What works?' programme. The main period of data collection and analysis was between January 2009 and September 2010.

Using an online survey, we contacted nearly 6,000 first and second year undergraduate students at Anglia Ruskin University, including students at our two joint venture partnerships within the region.

The project used a web-based Embodied Conversational Agent (ECA<sup>1</sup>) approach (see e.g. De Carolis et al, 2006) to gather data about the impact on

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<sup>1</sup> An embodied conversational agent (ECA) is an online character which interacts with a computer user to facilitate a dialogue.

retention of the Student Adviser and Personal Tutor roles. This method of survey delivery has been shown to allow people to interact with technology at a social level (Reeves and Nass, 1996). It was employed as a motivator to improve response and completion rates. The ECA ensured that participants were presented with the minimum number of questions depending on their individual answers. As part of this methodology a 'cartoon bear' interacted with participants encouraging them to continue and giving them information regarding the status of survey completion.

The online survey, entitled 'Staying the Course' (Appendix A) consisted of 22 free-text questions and 29 multiple choice questions. Questions covered a range of issues identified from the literature as being important in student retention, including thoughts about leaving; expectations; social integration, and sources of support (e.g. Tinto 1993, Benn 1982, Johnes & Taylor 1990, Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, Moortgat 1997, Berger & Braxton 1998).

## **Findings**

The online methodology produced a rich quantitative and qualitative dataset, which was analysed using SPSS and Nvivo software. Overall, 722 students responded (just over ten per cent of students contacted), representing a wide range of backgrounds and modes of study.

A key finding was that 42% of the participants in our study had thought about leaving on at least one occasion, and, of this group, 46.6% had thought about leaving on more than one occasion. Of the students who had considered leaving, 59% (n = 153) said that they had considered leaving due to a reason internal to themselves, such as personal circumstances, or self-doubt about their ability to succeed in higher education. Our survey also asked students to tell us about the occasions when they had thought about leaving, and 35% of students told us that they had considered withdrawing prior to or following assessment, or following a failure.

Students who felt more socially integrated with the university, however, had a more positive experience of HE, and were less likely to think about leaving, but a number of demographic groups (students with family commitments, commuting students, mature students, nursing students and part-time students) identified distinct reasons why they found social integration difficult. We also found that student resilience played a big part in their deciding to remain in higher education.

In relation to Student Advisers and Personal Tutors, it was clear that both roles have an important part to play in student support and retention. The key finding from this aspect of the study is that, although the advice provided by Student Advisers is important and valued by students, they do still want and require the slightly different advice provided by academic Personal Tutors. Personal Tutors scored most highly, for example, as the preferred source of help and advice for study concerns, with significantly more students (60% vs. 26.2% for Student Advisers) giving their Personal Tutor as their preferred source of support for such issues. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the Student Adviser role complements the more established academic Personal Tutor role, and we would recommend that consideration is given to promoting this role across the sector.

What we had not anticipated, at the start of our study, however, was the very high reliance students place on advice and support from family and friends, across a wide range of issues relating to their studies. The implication of this finding is that we need to provide more information for friends and family to help them guide the student to the right place to resolve these kinds of queries.

Retention levels have improved at Anglia Ruskin University over the past few years. We believe that, at least in part, this is due to the utilisation of data and insights from this project. Changes have included actions designed to 'reinvigorate' the role of Personal Tutors; the placing of more emphasis on student engagement; building a sense of community, and improving the volume and quality of information provided to family and friends.

# Report

## **What works? Student retention and success programme**

This report is a project output as part of the '*What works? Student retention and success programme*'. This three year evaluative programme has been initiated and funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce). The seven projects in the programme, involving 22 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), have been evaluating effective strategies and interventions to ensure high continuation and completion rates. The projects have been working to generate practical outputs. These include reports that enhance practice and associated toolkits and resources to assist other institutions to learn from their work and improve student retention and success. It is anticipated that the outputs of this programme will be particularly significant in the context of current changes in higher education.



## Abstract

This project investigated the impact of the roles of non-academic Student Advisers and 'traditional' academic Personal Tutors in relation to undergraduate retention at Anglia Ruskin University. One of the main aims of our project was to identify the students' perspective on the help they require when they experience difficulties; who they require this help from, and when they require it. We also looked at the factors influencing a student who is considering leaving university, and the sources and types of support within and outside our university which influence their decision to stay.

As one of the smaller projects funded by the '*What works?*' initiative, our research was carried out over an eighteen month period between January 2009 and September 2010. Using an online survey, we contacted nearly 6,000 first and second year undergraduate students at Anglia Ruskin University, including students at our two joint venture partnerships within the region. Overall, 722 students responded (just over ten per cent of students we contacted), representing a wide range of backgrounds and modes of study. The survey, which consisted of 22 free text and 29 multiple choice questions, generated both quantitative and qualitative data.

42% of students had thought, at some stage, about leaving higher education, and, among this sub-set, 46.6% had considered leaving on more than one occasion. Many of the reasons students gave for staying on in higher education were external to the university. Our findings showed that two factors in particular made a key contribution to students deciding to remain in higher education; firstly, influence and support from family and friends, and secondly, student resilience. Student engagement also emerged as an important factor, with those students who found it difficult to make friends at university (11.4% of the whole sample) having a more negative view of their experience of higher education.

Students experiencing difficulties with their studies wanted to be able to access a range of internal and external sources of support, depending on the type of concern they had.

Personal tutors, for example, scored most highly as the preferred source of help and advice for study concerns (60%), against a much lower score for Student Advisers (26.2%) and other support roles. In contrast, Student Advisers were the preferred source of help for issues around non-completion of assessments, such as mitigation (54.7%) and extensions (61.1%). In relation to the Personal Tutor role, students who had thought about leaving were less likely to think that their Personal Tutor was easily available, and were also less likely to say that their Personal Tutors was approachable. There was no overall relationship, however, between thinking about leaving and the frequency of meetings with their Personal Tutors.

The results of this research have informed our policies and provision in relation to the roles of Student Advisers and Personal Tutors. We remain committed to the provision of non-academic Student Advisers, but are now clearer about the boundaries of their role; we have also taken a number of steps to ensure that all students at Anglia Ruskin receive consistent support from their Personal Tutor, and have put effort into re-establishing the importance of this role, informed by the views of our students. Finally, we have started work to enhance and facilitate the important support provided by family and friends, by adding further information for parents and friends onto our website.

## **Introduction**

### **Institutional context**

*The context described here is the position that Anglia Ruskin was in when the project began, in 2008.*

Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) is a large HEI with about 24,000 students and two main campuses in Cambridge and Chelmsford, as well as smaller campuses in Peterborough and Fulbourn. It has a student population that includes large numbers of mature, part-time students, many with non-traditional backgrounds. We have adjusted our regional focus away from having many small further education (FE) partners to fewer but larger joint venture (JV) relationships. Consistency of higher education (HE) experience across all of Anglia Ruskin, including the JV partners, is a key aspiration for us.

The most recent HESA data (2009/2010) shows that our retention rates have steadily improved over the last three years, and we are now better than our benchmark. Our performance against HESA retention benchmarks prior to 2007 was, however, a cause for concern. To address this, Anglia Ruskin established a working group in 2007 to consider all aspects of student retention. The working group's recommendations and a wide range of actions were instigated from September 2008 for the academic year 2008/09.

The working group recognised that although the non-academic Student Adviser role, established in 2005, was contributing to more recent improvements in our retention data, there was still a need to increase academic support for students. Findings from our internal Early Leavers Survey (ELS) suggested that students still perceived the need for a member of academic staff to help them deal with crises, particularly in the early stages of their studies. One of the actions to emerge from the working group was to revitalise and reinvigorate the role of the academic Personal Tutor.

## **Aims and objectives**

The aim of this project was to provide comparative evidence of the contribution of Student Advisers and Personal Tutors to undergraduate retention at ARU, including its JV partners. Our research was prompted by concerns and issues raised by the 2007 National Audit Office report, '*Staying the Course*' (NAO, 2007) and the follow-up House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts report on student retention (CPA, 2008). Both these reports identified that students experienced academic and pastoral support as being limited and not fully meeting their needs.

Our research aimed to identify if students had thought about leaving, and if so what they had done about this and what had made them decide to stay. We wanted to explore the current support offered by the university and the students' view of this support. We looked at students' expectations and how involved they felt they were with university life. Finally, we aimed to obtain the student perspective on where they wanted to go to access support on a range of possible issues. The underlying objective was to obtain quantitative and qualitative data which would inform policies and provision in relation to the relative roles of the Student Advisers and Personal Tutors, not only at Anglia Ruskin, but at our regional partner institutions and across the HE sector as a whole.

From the start of this project we were keen to obtain insights from our JV partners. We regarded input from our JV students as particularly valuable, since our partner centres offer a milieu often perceived as more supportive than mainstream university culture.

## **Evaluation topic/focus**

The primary focus of the project was to evaluate the relative importance to undergraduate students of the roles of the non-academic Student Adviser and the 'traditional' Personal Tutor, and to investigate how these roles impact on undergraduate student retention.

## **Target group(s)**

The target group for our project was first and second year undergraduate students across all of our campuses and at two of our UK Joint Venture partners, namely the University Centre Peterborough (UCP) and the College of West Anglia (CWA). We included both full-time and part-time undergraduate students in our survey.

## **Student Adviser and Personal Tutor roles**

Of the two roles (Student Adviser and Personal Tutor), the Personal Tutor role is widespread, if variable in operation, across a range of HEIs (Wheeler and Birtle, 1993) and can have a positive impact on student retention (Davies and Elias, 2003). The provision of non-academic Student Advisers, however, is a recent development which has been thoroughly and positively evaluated at Anglia Ruskin (Wilson, 2006) and has been disseminated externally via conference papers, but has not yet been widely taken up across the sector.

Although the Personal Tutor role is well established at Anglia Ruskin, implementation has varied across our departments and faculties. All academic members of staff at ARU are required to perform the role of Personal Tutor, to assist and facilitate students on any issue relating to their studies. Each student is allocated a Personal Tutor that they first meet during Freshers' Week. The guidance is that students will have their second meeting with their Personal Tutor during their first six weeks of study, and then meet at least once more in both the first and second semesters. Across many departments, however, students and Personal Tutors meet more regularly than this during the first year of study.

The more established academic Personal Tutor role at ARU is complemented by the Student Adviser role, and the implementation of the role of the Student Adviser within our University has proved to be very successful.

The Student Adviser role at ARU is a graduate-level appointment, and some Student Advisers hold post-graduate qualifications, but Student Advisers are not academics and do not contribute to teaching or research. Most vacancies are filled internally, often by senior administrative staff. At least one Student Adviser is assigned to each Faculty, and where a Faculty is located on more than one campus it will have a Student Adviser located at each site. Our JV partners and international partners all have an allocated Student Adviser role. The role is centrally managed to ensure consistency of practice. As part of this project we explored the operation of the role of the Student Adviser with another HEI. Members of the core group, together with one of Anglia Ruskin University's Student Advisers, visited the University of the West of England in July 2009, to attend a meeting of the UWE student retention team. This was a successful visit which led to a productive and interesting exchange of ideas about the role and management of Student Advisers.

The Student Advisers are available to students for more than 30 hours per week throughout the year including non term times, and provide mutual cover for each other during periods of absence; any student can see any Student Adviser. Due to their extensive office hours, as well as their availability for email and telephone consultations, Student Advisers are more readily accessible to students than are academic members of staff. Student Advisers work closely with academic staff, but it is the Student Adviser who acts as the first point of contact for a range of student queries such as timetabling issues, applications for mitigations, and extensions to submission deadline. Currently at Anglia Ruskin and its partner institutions, only Student Advisers can grant short term extensions, to ensure consistency of experience for all students. All student enquiries to Student Advisers are logged, providing an extensive dataset on how the service is used.

The Student Adviser role was first piloted at Anglia Ruskin in 2004 (by the Ashcroft International Business School). The success of the initial pilot led to a rapid roll-out of the service across all faculties, from 2005, and more recently to our JV and International partners. The Student Adviser system is now well established at Anglia Ruskin.

Prior to this project, there was a decrease in focus on the provision of student support by Personal Tutors, in large part because of the initial success of the Student Adviser scheme.

In the report from the recent (December 2007) QAA institutional audit of ARU, the QAA team singled out as good practice, *'the role of the faculty Student Advisers in securing a coordinated approach to student support'* (QAA 2007). There is also some evidence (via informal feedback from students and academic staff) that the recent improvement in retention figures for ARU is linked to the provision of the Student Adviser service. Our retention rate has steadied, and then improved, over the period since the introduction of the Student Adviser service across all faculties in 2005.

### **Summary of the differences between Student Adviser and Personal Tutor roles**

Both Student Advisers and Personal Tutors at ARU are involved in delivering a range of student support interactions, including support designed to improve retention. Table 1 summarises the main differences between the current roles of Student Advisers and Personal Tutors<sup>2</sup> at Anglia Ruskin. The findings are based on the four key areas for undergraduate student retention that we identified in our original application for funding from the *'What works?'* initiative.

<b>Broad area of activity</b>	<b>Practices and specific responsibilities</b>	<b>Student Adviser (SA)</b>	<b>Personal Tutor (PT)</b>
1. Induction and early days experience	Meeting with students during Welcome Week	Student Advisers introduced to students	PT plays leading role in meeting students and guiding them through induction process
	Orientation	χ	✓
	Introduction to HE; expectations of study at HE level	χ	✓
	Introduction to pathway and modules	χ	✓
	Resolving timetabling queries	✓	(may refer student for assistance/make enquiry on the student's behalf)

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<sup>2</sup> The Personal Tutor role varies across programmes and departments at Anglia Ruskin University. This table represents best practice; for some programmes, Personal Tutors do not currently carry out all of these activities.

2. Early identification of students at risk	Monitoring of attendance	χ	Monitored by module tutors (who may be PTs)
	Formative assessment	χ	✓
	Targeting support to students who may be at risk of leaving	✓ (via direct advice or referral to specialist support services, and alerting PT and Programme Leader)	✓ (via direct advice or referral to specialist support services, and alerting PT and Programme Leader)
3. Support for students who seek help	Easy accessibility to students	✓ (regular office hours throughout the year; mutual cover for other Student Advisers)	X (office hours may be limited to three hours per week; tutors may not be readily accessible outside teaching weeks)
	Referral to Student Support Services (for counselling, financial advice etc)	✓	✓
4. Dealing with academic failure	Dealing with requests for extensions	✓	χ
	Dealing with/advising on mitigation claims	✓	χ
	Support with preparation for re-assessment	χ	✓
	Identification and review of modules with a higher than expected failure rate	χ (may provide informal feedback to Director of Studies)	Monitored by module leaders and programme leaders (who may be PTs)

Table 1: The roles of Student Adviser and Personal Tutor at Anglia Ruskin University

## Methodology

The project used a web-based Embodied Conversational Agent (ECA<sup>3</sup>) approach (see e.g. Carolis, 2006) to gather data about the impact on retention of the Student Adviser and Personal Tutor roles. This method of survey delivery has been shown to allow people to interact with technology at a social level (Reeves and Nass, 1996). It was employed as a motivator to improve response and completion rate.

The ECA ensured that participants were presented with the minimum number of questions depending on their individual answers.

As part of this methodology a 'cartoon bear' interacted with participants encouraging them to continue and giving them information regarding the

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<sup>3</sup> An embodied conversational agent (ECA) is an online character which interacts with a computer user to facilitate a dialogue.



status of survey completion. This online methodology produced a rich quantitative and qualitative data set.

The ECA online survey entitled '*Staying the Course*' (Appendix A) consisted of 22 free-text questions and 29 multiple choice questions. Questions covered a range of issues identified from the literature as being important in student retention, including thoughts about leaving; expectations; social integration, and sources of support (e.g. Tinto, 1993, Benn 1982, Johnes 1990, Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, Moortgat 1997, Berger & Braxton 1998).

In a review of the literature on undergraduate student retention, Thomas (2002) had identified seven areas of interest which deserved empirical investigation: academic preparedness; the academic experience (including assessment); institutional expectations and commitment; academic and social match; finance and employment; family support and commitments; and university support services. We incorporated these areas into the survey questions. Additionally, a separate section of our online survey was presented as a 'Big Grid' which asked students to tell us where *they wanted* to go to for support on a range of issues, from sources both internal and external to the university.

The online survey was advertised within our University and through an online link delivered to students by email. The survey was offered to all first and second year students enrolled on ARU and JV partner pathways (n = 6000) in month eight of their respective pathways. This enabled collection of data about induction and early days experience, as well as the support offered in relation to any problems students may have experienced, and their academic success/failure. The bias in this group, which reflects students who had stayed rather than those who withdrew, was moderated by also analysing the data from our Early Leavers Survey, undertaken annually.

### **Quantitative and qualitative data collection:**

i). Contextual data were collected, identifying entry qualifications, HE preparation input, pathway selected and other factors. This enabled us to identify if there were any factors which might put students at greater risk of withdrawal.

ii). Quantitative data were collected, exploring whether students had ever thought about leaving and if so, why; who they went to for advice and help, and why they selected this source. We also looked at the help and support offered, and its impact on them. Students were asked about their interactions both with Student Advisers and with their Personal Tutor. To allow us to use the student voice to inform the services we provide, students were asked where they would like to go to for help on a range of issues.

Data collected were analysed using the SPSS statistical software package. We carried out comparative matched analyses to determine if there were any correlations between students who had thought about leaving and our support roles (Student Advisers and Personal Tutors), as well as other practices and factors which have been identified in the literature as having an impact on student retention.

iii). Qualitative data were collected by the ECA; this was to encourage a more detailed response by generating a conversational ambience, rather than the standard open question included in some surveys. This aspect of our data collection was particularly focused on the multiplicity of problems that the literature indicates brings many students to the point of considering withdrawal. It also focused on students' perception of the effectiveness of the support they received (including suggestions for improvement).

Our qualitative datasets were analysed using the NVIVO software package, to generate concept maps which reflect an in-depth understanding of the students' perception of the Student Adviser /Personal Tutor roles.

We looked at which support roles students chose to use, and why; the support they received, and its impact on their decision to stay or leave.

## **Statistical methodology**

Both SPSS and NVIVO software were used to analyse the data set collected via the online survey; Excel spreadsheets were also used to summarise data. The percentages given in this report have been rounded up to one decimal place.

The Pearson's Chi-square test was applied where appropriate to test the statistical significance of our findings. Within this report, Chi-square is represented by  $\chi^2$ , the degrees of freedom are represented by df, and the P-value by p. A P-value of 0.05 or less is usually regarded as statistically significant, i.e. the observed deviation from the null hypothesis is significant. These figures have been rounded up to two decimal places.

## **Analysis**

During April and May 2009, 722 students responded to our online survey. This represented a higher than expected participation rate, of just over 10% of students who were contacted. In total, 559 students completed the entire survey. The rich data set collected contained responses from students who were drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and modes of study. This allowed us to expand our analysis beyond the role of the Student Adviser and Personal Tutor in influencing student retention, to the investigation of other factors affecting a student's decision to consider withdrawing, and the sources and types of support within and outside our University which helped them to decide to stay.

## **Sample bias**

The responses to our survey represented bias in terms of gender (73% female vs. c.63% in the overall university population) and campus (66% Cambridge vs. c.60% of the overall ARU university population).

We attempted to address the campus bias through re-administration of the survey to students at our JV institutions using a variety of methods: targeting these students through email, attending colleges to recruit students to

complete paper surveys, and making the survey available online for a further period. These measures, however, did little to increase the rate of response from the JV institutions, and this group remains under-represented in the data. Male students were targeted directly by the researcher, who attended courses with a male bias, but very few additional responses were received from male students. This may have implications for generalising from the findings of our research, particularly in terms of gender.

Part-time students were also under-represented in the data, with only 6.5% of responses coming from this group. These students have been shown to be particularly at risk for early withdrawal, with only 61.9% of part-time students in HE in the UK continuing into their second year in 2004-2005, compared with 90.6% full time students (NAO, 2007). HESA data for 2009/2010 indicates, however, that ARU's performance is excellent for the proportion of our part-time students who leave us after their second year of study. We are significantly better than both benchmark and all-England performance levels.

	HESA Data 2009/2010		
	ARU	Benchmark	England
Part Time entrants who are no longer in HE after their second year of study	13.9%	24.5%	33.9%

Table 2 2009/2010 HESA for Part Time Students

The sample was positively skewed in terms of age; 62.5% of respondents were aged 23 or below. The mode was 20 years (n = 145, 26%), followed by 19 years (n = 80, 14.4%) and 21 years (n = 71, 12.7%). The range of ages of respondents was from 18 - 64 years.

## Results

## Sample demographics

The survey contained a range of demographic questions:

1. When did you start your course?
2. Please tell us how old you are.
3. Where are your studies based?
4. Do you study full or part time?
5. Was Anglia Ruskin University your first choice?
6. How did you apply?
7. What course are you studying?
34. Are you male or female?
35. How do you describe your ethnicity?
36. Are you a UK student?
37. Qualifications needed for your course

These questions were analysed in relation to whether the respondents had thought about leaving. Chi-square tests were used to determine the statistical significance of the findings. Five areas were identified as having statistically significant results:

- Students who had picked ARU as their first choice of university were significantly less likely to have thought about leaving ( $\chi^2 = 9.42$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )
- Males were less likely to think about leaving than females ( $\chi^2 = 8.72$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )
- Students studying subjects within the Faculty of Arts, Law and Social Sciences (ALSS) were more likely to think about leaving than students from other subject areas ( $\chi^2 = 122.47$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )
- UK students were significantly more likely to have thought about leaving than EU or international students ( $\chi^2 = 21.95$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ )
- Students who entered their course with an Access or BTEC award, rather than A Levels, were more likely to think about leaving ( $\chi^2 = 19.81$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < 0.05$ )

## Thinking about leaving

We found that 42% (n=237) of respondents had thought about leaving at some stage. Moreover, 46.6% of students who had thought about leaving did so on multiple occasions. This number was higher than the project team had expected; nevertheless, these students had stayed on. This group of doubters or persisters were then prompted to answer three additional free text questions; why they had thought about leaving, what action they had taken, and why they had decided to stay.

### Why had students thought about leaving?

222 (94%) of the participants who had considered leaving answered this question. In total, 259 reasons for considering leaving were given, with some students listing more than one reason. The reasons given were initially categorised into two broad areas, those specific to the student, and those specific to the University. These broad categories were then broken down into a further six areas:

- Personal circumstances 29.3%
- Self-doubt 23.2%
- Academic issues 19%
- Course-related issues 15.3%
- Social 6.6%
- Institution 6.6%

Table 3 shows a further breakdown of categorisation of the responses, using NVIVO.

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<b>Internal to student (59%)</b>	<b>Internal to university (41%)</b>
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Personal	Homesick Family issues Financial Overwhelmed due to other commitments Stress Illness Dislike city To enter employment Coping mechanism	Poor organisation Poor communication Poor reputation Doesn't meet my expectations of a University Lack of flexibility for part-timers/ January starters not well supported	Institution
	Social	Accommodation Incompatibility with other students Bullying Lack of university experience due to commuting Isolation	Academic staff unsupportive Poor teaching/preparation Poor knowledge Lack of non-academic support
Self-doubt		Too much/difficulty of work Poor grades/fail Feeling of Academic Inadequacy Considering if degree was worth the work	Unhappy with course content/organisation Course not what expected/described Bored with course Course not useful for work Doubting course choice Poor value for money

Table 3 Breakdown of why students had thought about leaving

Of the students who had considered leaving, 59% (n = 153) said that they had considered leaving due to a reason internal to themselves, e.g.:

*“Felt too young to be at Uni. Not enough experience and couldn't cope with being alone.”*

*“Because I was trying my best but it seemed it was not good enough I wasn't getting the grade to pass.”*

The highest scoring reason in the 'internal to the student' category was 'personal reasons' (29.3%), followed by 'self-doubt' (23.2%).

Within the 'personal reasons' responses, no single issue stood out as being of overwhelming importance, and responses were fairly evenly spread across a number of concerns.

Again looking at the sub-sample of students who had considered leaving, 41% (n = 106) of these participants said that they had considered leaving due to a reason internal to the university, e.g.:

*“I didn’t feel I was receiving enough guidance on module choices & assignments; it wasn’t clear how resits should be done & I felt lost in the system!”*

*“I was unhappy with the organisation of the course for January starters.”*

The most frequent reason given in this category was a feeling that members of academic staff were unsupportive (9.6% of participants).

### **What action had they taken?**

213 (89%) of participants who had considered leaving answered this question. Several students gave more than one answer, and in total 240 actions were reported. These actions were again categorised into those internal to the students (55.4%, n = 118) and those internal to the university (39.6%, n = 106). Five per cent (n = 10) of the students in this sub-sample stated that they were still thinking about leaving. A further breakdown of the categories is shown in Table 4.

In the category ‘internal to the student’, the highest scoring responses were that they just carried on, or spoke to family and friends, or tried to become more positive (or a combination of these) e.g.:

*“Plodded on.”*

*“Talked to close friends and continued on as I knew the goal in the long run was worth not giving in for.”*

In the category ‘internal to the university’, the participants’ highest scoring actions were: talking to their Personal Tutor; talking to teaching staff, or talking to their Student Adviser, e.g.:



*“I spoke with my tutor about my concerns and then I set in place very strict timetables for my work to make sure that it was all completed on time.”*

*“I told my personal tutor who told me to wait longer to see how I felt.”*

<b>Internal to the student (55.4%)</b>	<b>Internal to the university (39.6%)</b>
Just carried on/did nothing	Contacted Personal Tutor
Spoke to friends/family	Spoke to teaching staff
Tried to become more confident/positive	Spoke to Student Adviser
Spoke to other students	Changed my mind
Reduced other commitments	Negotiated solution with ARU/resits/intermit etc.
Sought medical/counselling advice	Spoke to Student Support
Changed accommodation	Complained to Dept
Found financial support	Spoke to Head of Department
Made more social contacts	Changed course
Negotiated solution with employer	
Alcohol	
Travel home more frequently	

Table 4. *What students did when they felt like leaving.*

### **Why had they decided to stay?**

The answers to the third question ‘*Why did you stay?*’ were once again categorised as either internal to the student or internal to the university (Table 5). 228 (96%) of participants answered this question. 73.1% (n = 167) of this sub-sample said they had taken an action internal to themselves.

Within this category, over 40% (41.7%) of the students stated that they were either determined to complete their course, or that they tried to become more positive as the reason for continuing, e.g.:

*“Because I’m pursuing a dream I’ve longed for for years; no one’s going to take that away from me.”*

*“The degree was the most important thing – I felt that it was time to get serious and think about the future. Besides I’ve never quit at anything I’ve started (win or lose).”*

*“I believe that if something’s easy; it’s not worth doing and I don’t give up easily.”*

*“Because I don’t like the feeling of failure.”*

*“I’ve started, I should finish”*

*“When I wasn’t so stressed I realised that Uni is hard work but worth it; that the good outweighed the bad.”*

*“I believe that if something’s easy; it’s not worth doing and I don’t give up easily.”*

*“When I wasn’t so stressed I realised that Uni is hard work but worth it; that the good outweighed the bad.”*

*“I found my feet in the second year and feel much happier with my work and the universities facilities.”*

*“I got three 1sts so decided I could cope!”*

*“Because I realised I was just going through a “wobble” - a knock in confidence which I could recover from and prove to myself and others that I can be a good nurse!”*

*“I think everyone has a panic moment/second thoughts some time during their first years at university. Even if I don’t carry on with my subject after I finish; I think it is still beneficial to complete a university degree.”*

*“I felt I had not given the course the chance and felt sure things would get better as I get more confident”*

A much smaller proportion, 18.9% (n = 43), of the participants reported an action internal to the university.

*“Personal tutor said that the course would get better – I’ve been here a while now; studied my diploma here and some modules seem very similar but Personal Tutor promised things would change and that staying was in my best interests for my career.”*

*“I was referred to learning support who helped me.”*

Finally, 8% (n = 18) of the participants said that they were still considering leaving.

<b>Internal to student (67%)</b>	<b>Internal to university (25%)</b>
Determined to complete	Convinced by Personal Tutor
Became more positive	Convinced by Student Adviser
Financial investment	Like the course
Convinced by others/friends	Supported by other university staff/Support Services
Like the city	Like the university
Cleared up external issues	Cleared up internal issues
Difficult to leave	
Qualification required for specific job	
Improved job prospects	

Table 5. *Why students who had considered leaving went on to stay*

## **Thinking about leaving and assessment**

Our survey asked students to tell us about the occasions when they had thought about leaving. 35% of students told us that they had considered

withdrawing prior to or following assessment, or following a failure. Answers to the text question *'Why did you think about leaving?'* offer insight into the impact which assessment and failure has on thinking about leaving, e.g.:

*'Too many assessments due in too close together. I just don't have time to do them and I expect next year will be worse.'*

*'...because I was trying my best but it seemed it was not good enough I wasn't getting the grade to pass.'*

The level of academic support which students received when experiencing difficulty with assessment also contributed to their considering withdrawal, e.g.:

*'Lack of support with assignments - not being explained properly and not much help if you do need it.'*

*'Because I was finding my homework hard and not getting any support from my tutors.'*

However, answers to the question *'What did you do when you thought about leaving?'*, indicate that many students do find support within the university when they have difficulties with assessment:

*'I spoke to my Personal Tutor who assured me that I could turn things around.'*

*'I spoke with my tutor about my concerns and then I set in place very strict timetables for my work to make sure that it was all completed on time.'*

*'When I spoke to tutors we decided that I could re-take and I have made lots of effort and I am doing really well.'*

## **Thinking about leaving and academic support**

Our results show that dissatisfaction with academic support is often based on issues with one particular member of staff. In answer to the question '*Why did you think about leaving?*', several answers fell into this category, e.g.:

*'Conflict between myself and tutor'*

*'I wasn't getting the support and advice I needed.'*

Persisting students reported that this issue was usually successfully resolved, either through re-assessment of the situation, or through intervention by the university, e.g.:

*'I had a new lecturer this year who has been amazing.'*

*'Taught myself not to take everything so personally.'*

*'Myself and other students put in complaints about the lecturer and things got better'*

### **Thinking about leaving and curriculum**

15% of students told us that they had considered leaving HE for a reason associated with their course of study. The majority of these reasons related to the course content, e.g.:

*'Because the course was not what I thought it was.'*

*'Courses focus on technical aspects rather than design.'*

*'Course wasn't the spec. I was expecting; little info related from the prospectus to the course.'*

Whilst some students reported that they decided to stay as they had no other option, many students indicated that they re-evaluated their feelings about the course and then decided to continue, e.g.:

*'I think everyone has a panic moment/second thoughts some time during their first year at university.'*

*'I began to enjoy the course more and realised I would not have very many options if I left.'*

*'I had to give it a chance.'*

These findings suggest that some students enter HE unprepared for their course of study. This may be due to lack of preparation on the part of the student; however it may also be some courses are inadequately described or advertised. It should be a priority for universities to ensure that the information which students receive allows them to make informed choices when deciding on their course of study.

### **Social integration**

The data in this section were used to analyse the relationship between feeling involved with the university and thinking about leaving. The data were categorised into two groups: 'Involved' which included the answers "Fully involved" and "Most things related to ARU", and "Uninvolved" which included the answers "Not involved" and "Few things related to ARU". The analysis of these data showed a significant relationship between how involved or engaged a student felt with the university, and whether they had thought about leaving ( $\chi^2 = 5.8$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Overall, out of all respondents to the survey, 86.4% ( $n = 483$ ) of the participants stated that they had found it easy ( $n = 242$ ) or fairly easy ( $n = 241$ ) to make friends at university. 11.4% ( $n=64$ ) of the participants, however, stated that they had found it difficult to make friends or to join social groups.

There was a significant relationship between the students who found it difficult to make friends and the feeling that this was having a negative impact on their university experience ( $\chi^2 = 13.7$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). 83% ( $n = 53$ ) of the 64 students who found it hard to make friends or join social groups told us about the impact they felt that had on their being at university

*“It changed my thoughts about the university and what it had to offer”*

*“Yes. I came to meet new people and have made very few new friends. It makes me feel more isolated..... I like being around people so I have found this isolation difficult.”*

*“Made me want to leave even more so.”*

*“As a normally sociable individual; it has made being at Uni feel like more of a task than an enjoyable experience.”*

Several groups identified distinct reasons for why they found social integration difficult:

- Students with family commitments found it difficult to attend social events
- Commuting students could not easily attend evening events
- Mature students had difficulty fitting into a ‘youth centred culture’
- Nursing students worked to a different timetable and placements
- Part-time students were present less often so could find it difficult to integrate

In contrast, there was a significant relationship between the number of students who found it easy to make friends and the positive impact that this had on their university experience. ( $\chi^2 = 227$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Overall, 242 students told us that they found it easy to make friends or join social groups, and 186 of these students went on to tell us about the impact they thought this

had on their university experience. An overwhelmingly large number in this group (94%; n = 175) felt that this had a very positive impact on their experience.

*“I enjoy university a lot more as I have a lot of close friends; I think I would have considered leaving more often if I did not make friends.”*

*“It has made staying at university much better. The social aspect of university is just as important as the education; you learn so much in both.”*

*“It has made living abroad much easier; thus much easier to stay at University.”*

*“It has made me feel supported; as I know I am not alone in my thoughts and stresses.”*

### Work

51.7% (n = 289) of the students who responded to the survey had a paid job, and this included respondents who also listed family commitments. There was no significant relationship, however, between the commitments and responsibilities a student had and whether they had thought about leaving.

65% (n = 364) of the students who took the survey answered the question about work commitments. The mean number of hours per week which students reported working was 16 (SD = ±8.6), with the minimum being one hour per week, and the maximum being 50.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, further analysis showed that students who worked 20 hours or more each week were significantly more likely to say that their paid work had an impact on their studies ( $\chi^2 = 6.2$ , df = 1, p < 0.05).

A total of 144 students who work as well as attending university told us what impact they expected the work to have on their time at university. The majority of these students (63.4%, n = 92) felt that they would have less time



to spend on their university work. Twelve students (8.3%) felt that they could minimise the impact on their studies by working hard on getting the balance right, thorough effective time management. Six students, (4.2%) out of all the respondents to this question, felt that outside work would have a positive impact, either through reducing financial stress or by having a job that was related to their studies.

*“It has been a help as I am already working practically in the profession I am studying.”*

*“I’ll be more motivated; happier and proud of myself; I strongly agree that I have a great pair of skills! and that I would make any client happy with my work and creativity”*

*“The money is a major benefit. Also I personally need variety; not just Uni work.”*

### Time at university

In total, 514 students told us how many days a week they normally attend university; their average attendance was 3.46 days per week (SD ±1.06).

538 students told us if they felt they would like to attend on more or fewer days. The majority (60.8%, n = 327) felt that the number of days they attended university was about right. A minority of 11.25% (n = 60) said they would like to attend on fewer days. Almost half (46.7%, n = 28) of this minority sub-group said that they felt that the spread of lectures/seminars over the week could be compacted, so that they could attend less often.

Of the 538 students who answered the question on wanting to attend on more or fewer days, 28.1% (n = 151) said that they would like to attend university more often. 23.2% (n = 35) of this sub-group said that they felt they would learn more effectively if they attended university more often, and 16.6% (n = 25) said that they would like more contact time with lecturers.

This is noteworthy in light of the current debates about 'contact time' and value for money.

### **Student expectations**

There was a significant relationship between whether a student's expectations were met, and whether they had thought about leaving ( $\chi^2 = 67.1$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). 156 (27.9%) of all respondents said that their experience at university had not lived up to their expectations. The two main reasons for this were course content (22%), and organisation (22%) However, 70% of survey participants felt that their expectations of being at university had been met.

169 students (30.3%) told us what else would have been useful in preparing them for university (see Table 6). Of their responses, "better pre-entry information" is the largest category. The range of information which students said they would find useful included timetables, reading lists and more details about the modules which they would be studying, as well as information about how the university works and what is expected of a student.

Students also told us that they would like to have contact with existing students both before they arrive, and as a mentor on arrival. Some of this information is provided at Open Days; however 44% of the participants had not attended an Open Day or any other pre-study events.

	Frequency	Percent
Better pre-entry info	52	30.8
Other	29	17.2
Talking to current students	19	11.2
Better Information	13	7.7
Taster sessions	13	7.7
Financial assistance	10	5.9
Study skills training	10	5.9
Accommodation	5	3.0

Attending Open Day	5	3.0
Procedural information	4	2.4
Better Freshers' Week	3	1.8
Better induction	3	1.8
Better website	3	1.8
Total	169	100.0

Table 6. What else would have been useful to help you prepare for university?

A suggestion made by a proportion of students (7% of all respondents), which they felt would have helped their transition into HE, was the possibility of 'taster' sessions. Students felt that attending university for a short period of time would have given them the opportunity to evaluate the student experience, and to prepare for university in advance of their arrival.

### **Choice of university**

There was a significant relationship between whether a student thought that ARU was the right choice for them, and whether they had thought about leaving ( $\chi^2 = 65.7$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

478 students (85.5%) felt that ARU was the right choice for them, and 389 of these participants told us the reason why. The highest scoring category was 'location', with 38.8% ( $n=151$ ) citing it as their main reason for choosing ARU.

This group of answers is made up of mostly reasons relating to wanting to remain in the same geographical area in order to stay in the family home or not have to move; however a small proportion of these answers referred to wanting to move into the area, particularly Cambridge. The second highest scoring reason was 'course' (23.7%;  $n = 92$ ).

10.4% ( $n = 58$ ) of all students who responded to the survey felt that they had made the wrong choice in coming to ARU. 31.8% ( $n = 14$ ) of this sub-group cited their course not living up to their expectations as the reason why ARU was the wrong choice for them.

### **Student Adviser**

There was a significant relationship between knowing their Student Adviser and thinking about leaving, in that significantly more students who had thought about leaving had also sought advice from their Student Adviser ( $\chi^2 = 9.6$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However there was no significant relationship overall between going to a Student Adviser to seek advice, and thinking about leaving.

60% (n = 335) of all participants in the survey could name their Student Adviser and thought that their Student Adviser was easy to contact. When asked what they would like to see their Student Adviser for, 60% of the answers were to do with areas that the Student Adviser role is currently responsible for, such as mitigation and extensions.

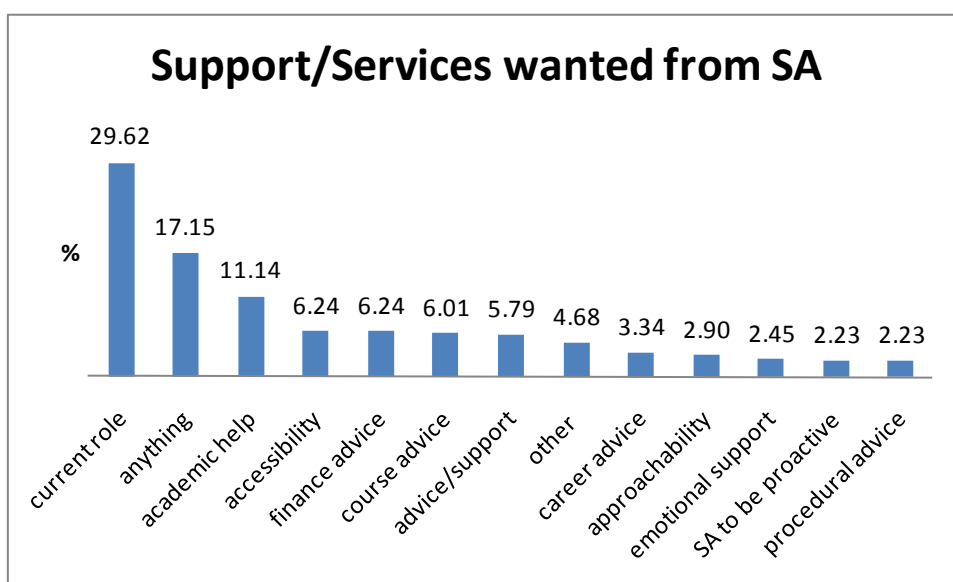


Table 7 Support or services students would like to get from a Student Adviser

Student quotes from answers fitting into the “current role” category:

*“Help when needed with personal issues clashing with assignment deadlines.”*

*“Help with obtaining extensions. “*

*“Course support; module choice support.”*

*“Advice on things affecting attendance and procedures to follow.”*

Student quotes from answers fitting into the “anything” category:

*“Help at all times. Someone to be supportive.”*

*“Any problems.”*

*“All round support holistically”*

*“Academic; financial; emotional and career. Basically turn to them for help for all Uni matters.”*

Student quotes from answers fitting into the “academic advice” category:

*“Help and support when we are having issues with essays and our tutors/lecturers don’t have time”*

*“More help with choosing dissertation topics?”*

For ARU, this highlighted the importance of the Student Adviser role in supporting students across quite a wide range of issues, some of which fall outside of the current job description.

## **Personal Tutor**

All students at ARU are allocated a Personal Tutor. However, almost 18% (17.7%, n = 99) of our sample were unaware that they had a Personal Tutor. Unlike the Student Adviser role there was no significant relationship between a student knowing their Personal Tutor, and thinking about leaving. It was also

found that there was no significant relationship between how often a student had met their PA, and thinking about leaving.

55% (n = 309) of all respondents felt that they had met their Personal Tutor often enough, and 68% felt that their Personal Tutor was easily available. 15% (n = 84) of all respondents, however, felt that they had not met their Personal Tutor often enough. 72.5% (n = 405) of students felt that their Personal Tutor was approachable.

When asked what participants would like to see their Personal Tutor for, only 16.5% (n = 92) chose the areas that the role is explicitly responsible for. A large number of participants, however, selected support or services that are part of the implicit role. 15% (n = 84) wanted to see their Personal Tutor for general advice and support, and 12.9% (n = 73) wanted to see them for assignment help. These data can be used to inform the role and responsibilities of the Personal Tutor, to help to match students' expectations. The complete breakdown is shown in Table 8

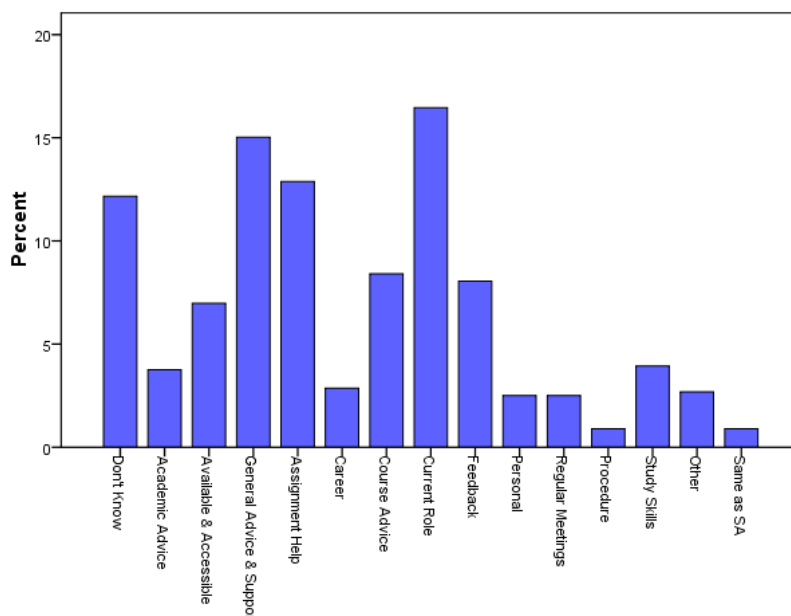


Table 8. Support or services students would like to get from Personal Tutor

Some quotations from participants relating to the issues students would like to see their Personal Tutor for:

*“Help on any questions I may have regarding my studies and assignments. I would expect them to find time for me so we can discuss anything in detail.”*

*“My tutor is available for any kind of support or advice and if he is unable to help; he either finds the information out or informs me of the relevant person to contact.”*

*“Help with assignments and to discuss feedback.”*

*“The support that I am receiving is what I would like: readily available to discuss both academic and personal issues.”*

*“Meeting at least twice a semester to see how I am progressing through my degree. “*

*“Help with management of the work and any personal issues”*

### Personal Tutor and thinking about leaving

Students who had thought about leaving were less likely to think that their Personal Tutor was easily available ( $\chi^2 = 6.9$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and also were less likely to say that their Personal Tutor was easily approachable ( $\chi^2 = 7.9$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). There was no significant relationship, however, between the availability of Personal Tutors and thinking about leaving. As already noted, there was also no significant relationship between seeking advice from a Student Adviser and thinking about leaving. However students who are thinking about leaving **do** want to be able to seek advice from either their Personal Tutor or a Student Adviser.

### **The ‘Big Grid’ question**

This question listed the potential issues or concerns that a student may have, and also identified a range of possible sources of support for these issues

(see Table 9). Students were asked to identify where they **wanted** to go to for support on the range of issues. In answering the 'Big Grid' question, they were able to select more than one source of support.

Potential issues and/or concerns	Sources of support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling low</li> <li>• Study concerns</li> <li>• A break from study</li> <li>• Academic advice</li> <li>• Wanting to leave university</li> <li>• Homesickness</li> <li>• Expectations not met</li> <li>• Change of course</li> <li>• Family concerns</li> <li>• Personal concerns</li> <li>• Health concerns</li> <li>• Financial concerns</li> <li>• Module planning</li> <li>• Mitigation or extension</li> <li>• Issue with an academic member of staff</li> <li>• Complaint</li> <li>• Harassment</li> <li>• Accommodation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Tutor</li> <li>• Student Adviser</li> <li>• Family / friends</li> <li>• Student Support Services</li> <li>• Academic staff</li> <li>• Programme or Pathway Leader</li> <li>• Faculty admin. staff</li> <li>• Students' Union</li> <li>• Student Representative</li> <li>• Chaplaincy</li> <li>• i-Centre</li> <li>• Library</li> </ul>

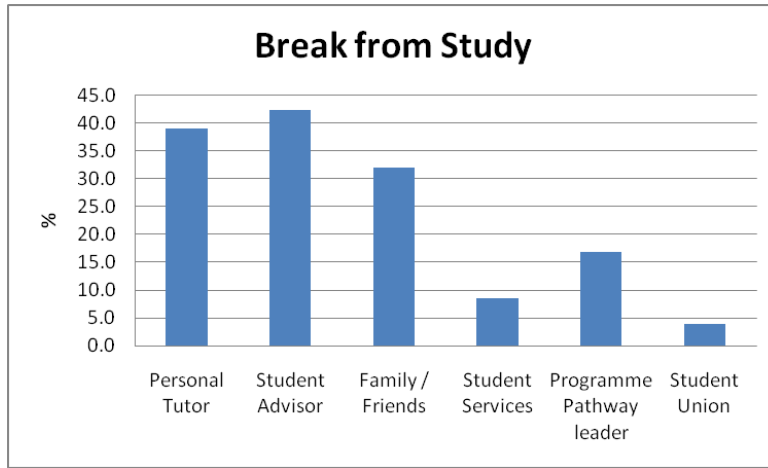
Table 9. Sources of support students could select, to address a range of issues.

Analysis of the data from the 'Big Grid' responses showed that on three issues, students scored almost equally on wanting to contact their Personal Tutor, Student Adviser or family and friends (FF). These issues were, firstly 'a break from study'; secondly, 'wanting to leave', and finally 'harassment' (see Table 10).

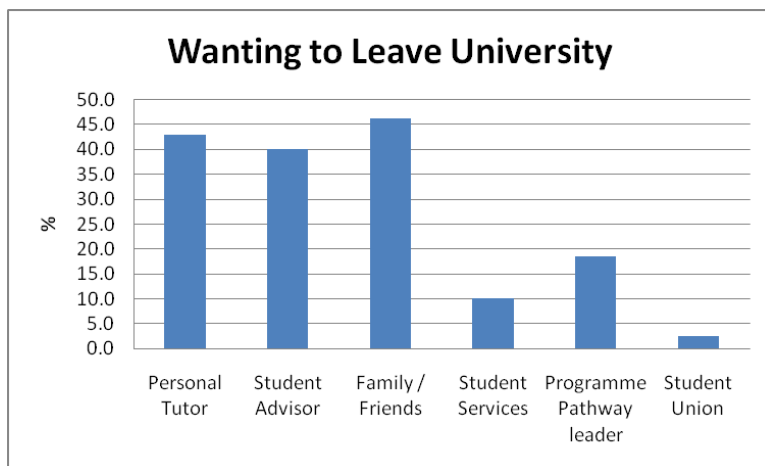
	Student Adviser	Personal Tutor	Family and Friends
A break from study	42.3% (n=236),	39.1% (n=218).	31.9% (n=178)
Wanting to leave	40% (n=223)	42.8% (n=239)	46.2% (n=258)
Harassment	37.8% (n=211)	37.3% (n=208)	28.1% (n=157)

Table 10. Students wanted to contact the Student Adviser, Personal Tutor or family and friends

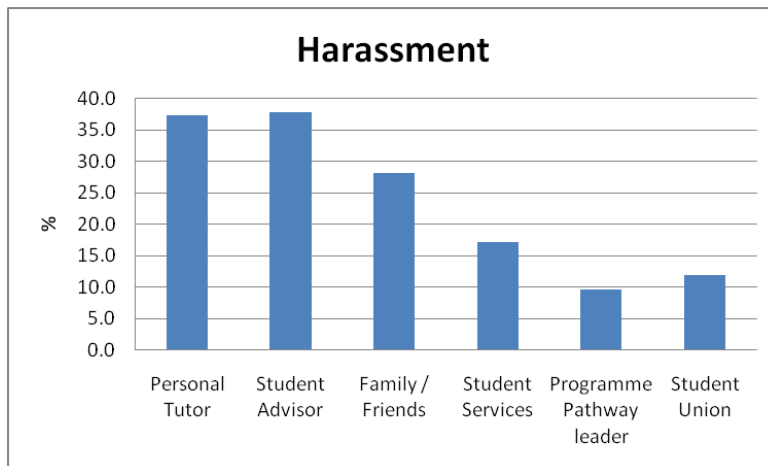




Graph 1. A break from study



Graph 2. Wanting to leave



Graph 3. Harassment

Unsurprisingly, on “family” issues there was a strong role for family and friends, selected in 76.2% (n = 425) of responses. However this role – family and friends - was also the top choice for students with regard to the following issues:

- Disappointment with expectations, 49.6% (n = 277)
- Financial concerns, 57.9% (n = 323)
- Feeling low, 81.4% (n = 454)
- Homesickness, 65.9% (n = 368)
- Personal issues, 76.2% (n = 425)
- Health concerns, 70.4%, (n = 393)

*\*Because students could select more than one response, these totals add up to >100%.*

For all of the above issues, with the exception of ‘disappointment with expectations’, the number of students selecting family and friends as a key source of support was significantly higher than the next most popular source of support.



Graph 4. Disappointment with Expectations

Less predictably, students said they would also like to approach friends and family for issues such as seeking mitigations or extensions. These are issues which are bound by ARU-specific regulations and processes which family and friends may not be aware of or have expert knowledge of.

Personal tutors scored most highly as the preferred source of help and advice for:

- study concerns, 60% (n = 335) (significantly more so than Student Advisers, at 26.2%)
- academic advice, 51.3% (n = 286)

For comparison, Student Advisers were the preferred source of help for mitigation (54.7%) and extensions (61.1%). However, at ARU Personal Tutors cannot grant extensions.

Personal Tutors and Student Advisers scored almost equally as the preferred source of help for:

- changing course, Personal Tutor 41.8%, Student Adviser 46.8%
- module planning, Personal Tutor 45.9%, Student Adviser 37.1%
- an issue with a member of academic staff, Personal Tutor 36%, Student Adviser 39.1%
- making a complaint, Personal Tutor 36.2%, Student Adviser 41.4%
- wanting to leave (but family and friends scored more highly here than either Personal Tutors or Student Advisers)

The analysis indicates that students had clear preferences for where they wanted to go for help, and suggests that family and friends have an important role in supporting students across not only personal but also academic issues. 11% said they would speak to friends and family about module planning; 10% for academic advice, and 9% regarding mitigation or an assignment extension.

## **Findings**

### **Thinking about leaving 40%**

Perhaps the most surprising fact from the data collected was that 42% of our 1st and 2nd year students had considered leaving HE at least once, and a large proportion of students who had thought about leaving had done so on multiple occasions (46%). However, the majority of these doubting students went on to stay. This finding was consistent across gender and age.

From the demographic data collected by the survey it was established that, firstly, students who had picked ARU as their first choice, and secondly, male students, were less likely to think about leaving. However students studying subjects within the Faculty of Arts, Law and Social Sciences; UK students, and students that entered their course with an Access or BTEC award were more likely to think about leaving.

### **Why did you want to leave and why did you stay?**

Student resilience plays a big part in students deciding to remain in HE. The determination to complete their studies, or developing a more positive attitude to their student experience (i.e. 'resilience'), accounted for 41.7% (n = 95) of the 228 students who gave a reason for deciding to stay on at university.. Our research shows that reasons specific to the student are a major contributor to students considering leaving HE (59.1%, n = 153). Within this category, the key factors were found to be either personal issues such as homesickness, family issues, finances etc, or because of self-doubt in their academic ability.

This highlights the importance both of good teaching and of support systems that will allow staff to develop awareness of when students are having difficulty with their learning. These are key factors in improving retention. University support is vital in encouraging students to continue. However, to promote a more positive outlook, students should also be made aware that many of their peers think about leaving, but most carry on and find that things improve.

Students clearly wanted to be able to access a range of internal and external sources of support when they were experiencing difficulties. Prior to the start of this project, we had considered a further reduction in the role and responsibilities of academic Personal Tutors at ARU . It is clear from our findings, however, that students have a strong wish to be able to seek help on study issues from their Personal Tutor, and that the Student Adviser role, whilst well used, cannot fully replace the traditional academic Personal Tutor role.

### **Social integration**

Social integration was identified as difficult for certain distinct groups of students, particularly students with family commitments; commuting students; mature students; nursing students, and part-time students. Our results indicate that individuals in these groups feel that their university experience and sense of belonging is negatively affected, and this leads to them considering withdrawing. Attempts must be made to develop appropriate interventions which facilitate the social integration of these target groups. It is important to ensure that all staff understand how vital it is that every student feels that they 'belong' to an academic community, and that the wider aspects of the student experience are as important as the academic content of the course.

### **Student expectations**

Course content and organisation are key factors in meeting students' expectations. It is important for university staff to ensure that information given to students prior to their entering university gives clear and accurate information about the course the student has decided to enrol on. Participants who answered the question 'What else would have been useful to help you prepare for university?' asked if they could have pre-entry information that included timetables, reading lists, module details, more information about how the university works and what is expected of a student.

Although a number of these topics are often covered during open days, the survey identified that more than 40% of respondents to the survey had not attended an open day or any other pre study event.

### **Personal Tutor and Student Adviser**

Our evaluation of the roles of Personal Tutor and Student Adviser indicate that these distinct roles meet the needs of students across a range of difficulties and issues, including when students are thinking about leaving. Holders of these roles are a particularly valuable resource for improving student retention, as they regularly meet with students and can identify students who may be considering withdrawal. Student Advisers meet students when they are making module choices or if they require an assessment extension or mitigation. This gives Student Advisers access to students at key points when they may be experiencing difficulties or doubts about continuing their studies. In order to equip Personal Tutors and Student Advisers to deal sympathetically and effectively with students who are considering leaving, training into how best to recognise and deal with at-risk students should be provided.

Our research has identified that the Student Adviser role is an important one within our institution. The Student Adviser role complements the more established academic Personal Tutor role, and we would recommend that consideration is given to promoting this role across the sector.

### **'Big Grid' – family and friends**

One of the main themes to emerge from the analysis of the results was that, across a wide range of issues, including both academic and personal matters, students wanted to talk to their family and friends (although Personal Tutors and Student Advisers rated highly on many issues too).

In particular, students wanted to talk to family and friends when they were feeling low, experiencing homesickness, or concerned about health, financial, personal problems or disappointed with expectations. However, family and friends were selected to some degree for all issues. This finding was unexpected, particularly for issues such as seeking an extension or mitigation and module choice information, as it would have been thought that support for these issues would be best found within the university (although we acknowledge that friends may in some cases include fellow students, or older siblings who are also at university).

A key finding was that, when thinking about leaving university, 46.2% of students wanted to seek advice from their family and friends. The results of our survey suggest that support from family and friends may play a much greater role than anticipated in areas such as retention and the overall student experience.

If friends and families are better informed they may be able to help students cope when difficulties arise. However, it is necessary to consider how best to inform this group without impinging on the autonomy of the student. Several measures could be put in place which would address this issue, whilst leaving the decision to use friends and family as a source of support up to the student. Information regarding when and why students consider withdrawing, and the services and procedures available within the university, could be made available both at open days and on a well-publicised area of the website. Additionally, students could designate a friend or family member to receive a booklet containing this information.

We already know that the transition into higher education is a difficult time for many students, whatever their background. Family and friends may be the only constant in the student's life at this time and as such may have a strong influence on any decisions about staying or leaving. If early links are built between the university and the family, then family members will be better placed to provide appropriate advice and support.

Empowering family and friends to help students come to terms with the emotions and issues they are experiencing, and directing them to the best sources of assistance within the university, may be an effective way of providing indirect support and having a positive influence on student retention.

## **Key messages**

- 42% of the participants in our study had thought about leaving on at least one occasion; of this group, 46.6% has thought about leaving on more than one occasion.
- Male students, and students who had picked ARU as their first choice, were less likely to think about leaving.
- UK students, students from Arts, Law and Social Science subjects and students who entered their course with a BTEC or Access award were more likely to think about leaving.
- Students who felt more socially integrated with the university had a more positive experience and were less likely to think about leaving.
- Key groups (students with family commitments, commuting students, mature students, nursing students and part time students) identified distinct reasons why they found social integration difficult.
- 28.1% (n = 151) of the participants who told us about how often they would like to attend university said that they would like to attend university more often. The average attendance of respondents was 3.46 days (SD  $\pm$ 1.06)
- Student resilience plays a big part in a student deciding to stay in HE
- Participants said they would like more pre-entry information.
- 43.8% (n = 245) of participants had not attended an open day or other pre study event.
- There is a significant relationship between university not meeting expectations and students thinking about leaving.
- Students want to be able to access a range of internal and external sources of support when they are experiencing difficulties.
- The Student Adviser and Personal Tutor both have an important role to play in student retention.



- Family and friends also have an important role to play in student retention.
- When thinking of leaving 46.2% (n = 258) students talk to family or friends.

## **Actions arising**

As a result of this study, ARU will:

- Review the roles and responsibilities of the Personal Tutor and the Student Adviser.
- Promote the role of Personal Tutor, and ensure all academics are trained and aware of the responsibilities of this role to promote consistency of how the role is implemented.
- Update the 'Family and Friends' area of the website to include information about concerns that students may have, and where to direct students to get appropriate support
- Produce 'frequently asked questions' (FAQs) information for family and friends.

## **Action already taken:**

All students are now allocated a named Personal Tutor, from among the academic staff (usually, this will be one of the lecturers on their course). In addition, all members of academic staff are expected to undertake the Personal Tutor role. In many areas of Anglia Ruskin, Personal Development Planning (PDP) is now led by Personal Tutors.

Personal Tutors are expected to play a key role in retention by identifying students 'at risk' of leaving' and maintaining open, friendly communication with their tutees (training sessions for Personal Tutors are provided to facilitate this).

ARU has implemented a system for returning coursework whereby students meet with their tutor to receive their work and feedback. This has proved to be valued by the students who receive personalised guidance on how best to maintain or improve their progress.

To enhance social integration and the student experience, the Anglia Ruskin Students' Union is encouraging students to create faculty and/or department based societies. This initiative has been implemented to help to increase the sense of belonging and community on campus within subject-related groups.

ARU has also been undertaking a more thorough analysis of qualitative and quantitative student data from a range of sources related to student satisfaction. As a consequence, we have determined that a more focused drive is desirable in order to progress change across our university. To achieve this in May 2010 we formed the Student Satisfaction Improvement Group, chaired by our Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), and tasked with measurable actions and outcomes.

## **Conclusions**

This project has been valuable and worthwhile for Anglia Ruskin University and, we hope, for the sector more widely. We are grateful for the support of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Hefce.

Our original objective was to evaluate the roles of Personal Tutor and Student Adviser from the perspective of our students. The key finding from this aspect of the study is that, although the advice provided by Student Advisers is important and valued by students, they do still want and require the slightly different advice provided by academic Personal Tutors.

The data provided a number of other interesting and important findings. It is useful for us all to be aware that as many as 40% of all students think of leaving at some point. We now have much more information about why the majority of those students stay with us despite these doubts and concerns.

The importance of social contacts and feeling part of a community comes across strongly from these results, as does the important role played by the range of different people providing formal and informal advice and support.

The other important and rather unexpected finding is that students rely considerably on friends and family for advice, even for issues such as mitigation and extensions which have detailed regulations and protocols attached and in which friends and family may well not be expert. The implication of this finding is that we need to provide more information for friends and family to help guide the student to the right place to resolve these kinds of queries.

Retention levels have improved at Anglia Ruskin University over the past few years. We believe that, at least in part, this is due to the utilisation of data and insights from this project. Changes have included actions designed to 'reinvigorate' the role of Personal Tutors; the placing of more emphasis on student engagement; building a sense of community, and improving the volume and quality of information provided to family and friends.

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## Appendix 1 – Staying the Course Survey Questions

1. When did you start your course?

Semester 1 – 2006-2007

Semester 2 – 2006-2007

Trimester 1 – 2006-2007

Trimester 2 – 2006-2007

Trimester 3 – 2006-2007

Semester 1 – 2007-2008

Semester 2 – 2007-2008

Trimester 1 – 2007-2008

Trimester 2 – 2007-2008

Trimester 3 – 2007-2008

Semester 1 – 2008-2009

Semester 2 – 2008-2009

Trimester 1 – 2008-2009

Trimester 2 – 2008-2009

Trimester 3 – 2008-2009

2. Please tell us how old you are

3. Where are your studies based?

- Chelmsford
- Cambridge
- University Centre Peterborough
- Peterborough Faculty of Health and Social Care
- Peterborough Regional college
- College of West Anglia/University Centre Kings Lynn
- Fulbourn

4. Do you study?

- Full time
- Part time

5. Was Anglia Ruskin University your

- 1<sup>st</sup> choice
- 2<sup>nd</sup> choice
- Clearing choice

6. Did you apply through

- UCAS
- Directly to Anglia Ruskin through the admissions office or an admissions tutor
- An agent

7. What course are you studying?

**Some questions about Advice, Guidance and Support at our University. There are quite a few of these questions because it is really important to us to find out about the support we provide.**

### **Student Adviser questions**

8. Who is your Student Adviser?

9. Is your Student Adviser easy to contact?

- Yes
- Yes, and I have also contacted a Student Adviser from another Faculty
- No, but I have contacted a Student Adviser from another Faculty
- No
- Don't know

10. What kind of support or services **would you like to get** from a Student Adviser?

11. Have you ever sought advice from a Student Adviser?

- Yes
- No **If no display Personal Tutor questions**

12. What did you see them for?

### **Personal Tutor questions**

14. Do you have a Personal Tutor? **If no display the General Advice Questions**

15. What is their name?

16. How often have you met them?

- Never
- Once or twice
- Mainly in my first semester
- Regularly throughout my study
- Other

Other please explain

17. Has this been enough or too much, please explain

18. What have you seen them for?

19. Is your Personal Tutor easily available?

- Yes
- No

20. Is your Personal Tutor approachable?

- Yes
- No

21. What kind of support or services **would you like to get** from a Personal Tutor?

### **General advice questions**

22. Which other services at Anglia Ruskin have you accessed for advice, guidance and support?

23. Can you tell us about a positive experience that you have had at Anglia Ruskin University when seeking advice, guidance and support?

24. Can you tell us about a negative experience that you have had at Anglia Ruskin University when seeking advice, guidance and support?

### **Some questions about leaving**

25. Have you ever thought about leaving? **if no display question 30 the big grid**

- Yes
- No

26. When did you think this: **Note – students can select more than one**

- In the first two weeks
- At the end of the first semester/trimester
- At the end of the first year
- In the second year
- Returning after Christmas
- Before an assessment period
- After an assessment period
- After an academic failure
- Other

Other please state

27. Why were you thinking about leaving?

28. What did you do about it?

29. Why did you decide to stay?

**30. THE BIG GRID** (please see the end of the question set)

### **Some questions about your expectations of University**

31. Has your experience at university lived up to the expectations that you had prior to joining?

- Yes
- No

**If No please explain why**

31. Which of the following preparation events did you attend before starting your course? **(students can pick more than one)**

- Open Day
- Summer School
- Did not attend anything

32. What else would have been useful to help you prepare for university?

### **Some short easy to answer questions**

33. Are you

- Male
- Female

34. How do you describe your Ethnicity?

- White – British
- White – Irish
- Other White background
- Black or Black British – Caribbean
- Black or Black British – African
- Other Black background
- Asian or Asian British - Indian
- Asian or Asian British - Pakistani
- Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi



Chinese  
Other Asian background  
Mixed – White and Black Caribbean  
Mixed – White and Black African  
Mixed – White and Asian  
Other Mixed background  
Other ethnic background  
Prefer not to say

35. Are you a:

- UK student
- International student
- EU student

36. Which of the following qualifications did you need to be accepted on to your course? (students can select more than one)

- GCSEs
- A Levels
- Work Experience
- Prof Qualifications
- NVQs
- Access Course Diploma
- BTEC
- Accreditation for prior learning
- International Baccalaureate
- Other (please state)

Other

37. Why did you choose Anglia Ruskin University?

38. Was this the right choice for you?

39. Can you tell us why this was?

### **Some questions about your involvement with your University**

40. Tell us how involved you think you are with your university

- fully involved
- most things I do are connected to the university
- some things I do are connected to the university
- few things I do are connected to the university
- not at all

41. In your time at Anglia Ruskin, can you tell us how easy you have found it to make friends / join social groups?

42. How do you feel this has impacted on how you feel about being at University?

### **This is the last section - some questions about your life outside of University**

43. Please tell us something about any other commitments and/or responsibilities that you have outside of your course (*such as employment, family commitments, dependants, etc*)

44. If you have, or hope to have, a job during term-time, for how many hours do you normally expect to be employed each week?

45. Do you think this will impact on your studies?

Yes, **if yes please explain why**

No

Please can you tell us what impact it is likely to have?

46. Can you tell us about where you live?

- In a shared house
- In halls
- With my parents
- With extended family
- With a host family
- With my husband/wife/partner
- Other – please explain

Other

48. How many days a week do you usually attend university?

49. Do you feel you would like to attend

- More often
- less often
- It's about right

50. Please explain why

51. Please comment on anything else that you think may be relevant to the issues raised in this questionnaire.

### **Some optional questions**

52. Your name

53. Student ID Number

54. Your email

55. Would you like to talk to someone about anything in this survey?

56. Would you be willing for someone to contact you if we have any follow up questions?

**Question 30. 'The Big Grid' - If you wanted to seek advice relating to any of the following issues, please click who you would like to go to for support. Please select all that apply.**

Issues	Personal Tutor	Student Adviser	Friends/ Family	Student services	Academic Staff	Programme Pathway Leader	Faculty Admin staff	Student Union	Student Rep	Chaplaincy	i-centre	Library
Feeling low												
Study concerns												
A break from study												
Academic advice												
Wanting to leave University												
Homesickness												
Disappointment in expectations												
Change course												
Family concerns												
Personal concerns												
Health concerns												

Issue/difficulty/ Concern	Personal Tutor	Student Adviser	Friends/ Family	Student services	Academic Staff	Programme Pathway Leader	Faculty Admin staff	Student Union	Student Rep	Chaplaincy	i-centre	Library
Financial Concerns												
Module planning												
Mitigation												
Extension												
Issues with an Academic member of staff												
Complaint												
Harassment												
Accommodation												





Anglia Ruskin  
University

# **A comparative evaluation of the roles of student adviser and personal tutor in relation to undergraduate student retention**

## **Final report**

**Anglia Ruskin University**

Authors:

Jacqui McCary, Sheila Pankhurst, Helen Valentine  
and Angela Berry

July 2011

**What Works?** Student Retention & Success

