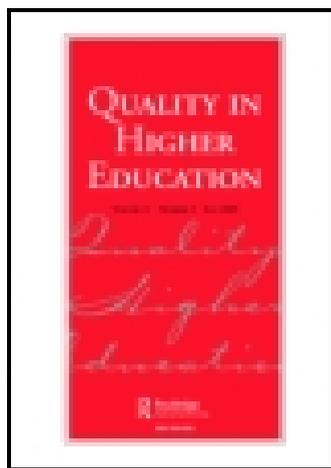


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Learning Environment: Relevant or Not to Students' Decision to Leave University?

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ABSTRACT *This paper presents an analysis of the reasons why students in Norway leave higher education institutions before degree completion and the extent to which these reasons are of the type that can be influenced by the university. As occurs in many countries, a proportion of students starting an undergraduate liberal arts degree in Norway leave their university without completing their degree. The institutions' capacity to influence this decision is limited. The most common reasons for students either transferring or dropping out are beyond the university's control. However, for both types of leavers, the learning environment seems to have been somewhat influential in the decision to leave. Therefore, improving the learning environment through closer contact between students and teachers will probably also enhance retention.*

Keywords: retention (of students); student departure; learning environment; factor analysis; Norway; student-staff interaction

Introduction

The massive expansion in higher education in recent decades has led to growing concerns about both cost-effectiveness and quality. Cost-effectiveness is related to whether the public funding applied to higher education is spent efficiently, which has been a topic of interest for a long time. Green (1992) argued that the rapid growth in higher education led to a general quest for providing better service to the public and competition between institutions for students and resources, which also created a tension between efficiency and quality. The efforts to increase access to higher education over the years have led to larger numbers of young people attending a higher education institution. However, expansion has also led to a more diverse student body, with greater variance in academic preparedness and motivation among students than earlier. This may have implications for the number of students completing a degree. From the institution's and society's perspective students who fail to complete their studies can be seen as non-cost-effective, since they use the institution's

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educational resources but do not achieve a formal degree. The enhanced focus on the cost of higher education has also led to a rising interest in studying student retention.

Student retention can also be seen as a form of quality: the perception of an institution's quality is likely to be higher if more students from that institution complete their studies. Peterson *et al.* (1997) argue that student retention is a relevant measure of quality. Retention is used as a quality measure by several countries. In the US, for example, graduation and retention are the key indicators used by government authorities to measure academic performance (Burke, 2005). Consequently, a specific institution's retention rate will also be related to the quality of its incoming students. The better prepared for higher education students are, the better the retention rate will be. Tinto (1993) argues that institutions that are more selective usually have higher retention rates. However, not all institutions can afford to admit only the most able students; they have to admit a more diverse range of students. Such institutions have to manage retention rates through means other than restricting access. The massification of higher education and the competition for students by institutions has forced the need for a focus on quality improvement rather than merely limiting access. Therefore, in order to improve retention, the institution has to know more about why students leave. Institutional efforts to improve student retention are, therefore, an important component of quality improvement. Generally speaking, having high-quality curricula, teachers and teaching, student supervision and learning environments, as well as a positive social climate at the institution are important factors for the prevention of non-completion. Consequently, there is a rising interest in most countries in studying student retention, at both institutional and national levels.

Until recently, there has been less focus in Norway on studying retention than on admission, equity and quality. However, this is changing and retention has become a matter of increasing interest both to the policy makers and to Norway's higher education institutions. In 2003, Norway implemented a comprehensive higher education reform with the major objective being that the 'student should succeed'. One of the means of accomplishing this was more intensive teaching and tutoring. One effect of the reform was that the system for financing higher education was changed from one based on the number of students admitted to the institution, to one based on number of credits taken and number of students graduating (KUF, 2001). These changes have led to an increase in institutional interest in student departure, although this has been common in some fields of study such as social science and humanities for the last decade or more (Aamodt, 2001). Simultaneously there is an ongoing debate on how to increase student learning and how to improve the learning environment. Furthermore, the issues of retention and the learning environment are somewhat related, as focus on learning may be a relevant strategy for institutions aiming to improve the way they handle their retention problems (Tinto, 2000).

Historically, retention has been an issue that has had a much more prominent place on the research agenda in the US than elsewhere in the world. However, in recent years there has been quite a lot of research on the issue in Australia (McInnis & James, 2004) and in the UK (Yorke, 1999, 2000; Yorke & Longden, 2004, 2008; Longden, 2006). One factor that is common to these countries is that they have tuition fees and this possibly makes financial factors more prominent as a reason for students leaving an institution. In Norway, there are no tuition fees and financial reasons for leaving might therefore be less important. This paper explores students' own reasons for leaving the university and identifies the extent to which the universities have tools at hand to prevent non-completion. Norway represents an interesting case because of the recent reforms aimed at increasing retention and because no

tuition fees are charged. These factors might alter the salience of different types of reasons for leaving.

Previous research on why students leave university

Most of the research conducted on retention issues has been focused on the number or proportion of students leaving higher education and less on why students leave. In some of the early research, a lack of academic preparation was seen as a general reason for students leaving university and many studies were therefore focused on students who were under-prepared for higher education (Noel *et al.* 1985; Ozga & Sukhnandan 1998). However, Tinto (1993) pointed out that this reason only applies to a minority of the students leaving, about 15–25%. Hence, most students have reasons for leaving other than academic difficulty. In addition to this, blaming students for being academically underprepared can easily turn into a deficit discourse (Zepke & Leach, 2007), where a student that leaves is looked upon as having failed. Students leaving the course or institution where they started are not necessarily failures; some students actually leave because they find employment and their departure could therefore be seen as one of strength.

There can be numerous reasons for a student leaving university and the factors influencing departure can be both external and internal to the university. This study will focus on students that leave their higher education institution voluntarily and to describe the different forms of student departure. A distinction is drawn between students who drop out of higher education and students who transfer from one institution to another. These two concepts are similar to what Tinto (1993) labels 'system departure' and 'institutional departure'.

Tinto (1993) divides the 'causes' of individual departure from higher education institutions into three major categories: dispositions that the students had before they came to the institution, experiences at the institution and external forces in the form of obligations and finances (Tinto, 1993, p. 81). Tinto also argues that what occurs at the institution is more important for retention than what has happened before the student started studying (Tinto, 1993, p. 82). Therefore, focusing on the student experience, his main argument is that commitment and academic and social integration at the institution are vital for improving retention.

Yorke (1999, 2000) conducted a survey on students who dropped out of higher education in England and, through factor analysis, suggested six types of reason for student departure. Students left because of the poor quality of the student experience, they were unable to cope with the demands of the programme, they were unhappy with their social environment, they had chosen the wrong programme, they had financial problems of some kind or because they were not satisfied with aspects of institutional provision (Yorke 1999, pp. 39–55). However, wrong choice of programme and financial difficulties were the most common single reasons reported by students for leaving.

Davies and Elias (2003) conducted a similar survey of students who had dropped out of higher education in England. They found that the most commonly cited reasons for leaving higher education were 'a mistaken choice of course, financial problems and personal problems' (Davies & Elias, 2003, p. 47). However, reasons related to the quality of the education were not listed in their questionnaire and, therefore, not controlled for. They also found that men and older students (over 21) were more likely to refer to financial problems as the main reason for leaving, which is similar to the differences between groups found by Yorke (1999).

In a synthesis of the two surveys, Yorke and Longden (2004) grouped reasons into four main categories: 'Flawed decision-making about entering the programme', 'Students'

experience of the programme and institution generally', 'Failure to cope with the demand of the programme' and 'Events that impact on students' lives outside the institution'. They emphasised that the boundaries between categories are not clear-cut and that institutions primarily can affect the second category and to a limited extent they can also affect the first and third categories, while the fourth category is beyond the institutions' control (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 104).

In a recent study of students' first-year experience in higher education in the UK, Yorke and Longden (2008) surveyed students that had not re-enrolled in their second year, as a form of exit survey. This survey had many similarities with the one conducted in 1997 (Yorke, 1999) and the results could be compared. There was not much change over time, apart from financial reasons which were less salient in the 2006 survey than they were in the 1997 survey. Yorke & Longden (2008) interpreted this as students now taking finance into account when they decide to enter higher education.

The Norwegian Context

Norway has a binary higher education system and a clear division of labour between the two types of institution (universities and university colleges). At the same time, a characteristic of the Norwegian degree system is the option for flexible transfer between universities and university colleges. The universities offer structured professional programmes (five to six years) and more loosely structured undergraduate degrees in humanities, social sciences and natural sciences and two-year graduate (master's) degrees. Until 2003, the undergraduate degree was four years but it has been reduced to three years to be in line with the Bologna Process. In the loosely structured programmes the students configure a degree themselves according to their interests by combining subjects. The university colleges offer a broad range of study programmes but the three (or four) years professional programmes (nursing, teaching, social work and undergraduate engineering) dominate. This study is based on a survey of students in loosely structured undergraduate programmes at universities.

Admission to higher education in Norway is regulated by a national set of rules and students apply for admission to universities and university colleges via a national admission centre. Some programmes, especially the professional programmes at university (for example, medicine), receive a very high number of applicants and are, therefore, strictly selective, while other university programmes, such as those in the humanities and social sciences are open to almost all applicants who have the formal entry qualifications. Professional study programmes at the university colleges used to have more applicants than the number of study places available. Therefore, a considerable number of new students start their studies in university programmes with open access while waiting for admission to a specific university college programme.

Most higher education institutions in Norway are public and charge no tuition fees. Hence, higher education is free of charge. Most students are eligible for governmental financial support (grants and loans) through the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund (Opheim, 2005) and the loans are interest-free while the student is studying (Lånkassen, 2009).

Student departure is quite common in Norway: more than 50% of the students leave the university in which they initially enrolled, within four years, without completing a degree at that institution. However, the majority of the leavers transfer to another higher education institution and 17% leave higher education completely (Hovdhaugen, 2009). Consequently, student departure is a greater problem for institutions than it is for society. Previous research using the same dataset has shown that there are different factors that increase the

risk of drop out and the risk of transfer. Students' background characteristics have an impact on drop out: male students, students with low grades and students with parents with no experience of higher education have a higher risk of dropping out. On the other hand, transfer is best explained by field of study, motivation and commitment. Students who display low commitment to their studies or who lack motivation or who are taking programmes in the social sciences and humanities have a higher risk of leaving before degree completion (Hovdhaugen, 2009).

Research Questions

Previous international and Norwegian research has indicated that there are many reasons why students leave higher education. As noted earlier, this paper distinguishes between students who transfer and students who drop out. However, from the institution's point of view they might all seem to be the same, since the students are leaving the institution. Given that different factors influence the propensity for students to transfer and to drop out; does this also indicate that students transferring or dropping out have different reasons for doing so? Or are the reasons for leaving the same, regardless of type of departure? The first research question is therefore: *Are there different reasons for different forms of student departure?* Second, the types of reason students give for leaving university might also affect the possibility of the institution influencing the retention rate. The second research question in this paper is therefore: *To what extent can universities influence students' decision to leave or to prevent student departure?*

Data and methods

This paper is based on a survey conducted in 2005 among students who started their undergraduate studies in humanities, social science or science in autumn 1999 at the three largest universities in Norway. A sample of 3537 students was drawn from university records and each student received a mail survey with questions about their academic progress and if they had completed their studies, transferred to another institution or left higher education before degree completion (dropped out). The overall response rate was 50.2% (1776 respondents) and there were only small differences in response rate between the universities. However, women generally had a higher response rate than men and the response rate also varied between fields of study. For these reasons, the results were weighted to compensate for the lower male response rate across different fields of study.

The survey instrument was a six-page questionnaire, asking not only if the respondents had left or stayed at the institution but also their reasons for these actions. These questions were asked only of students who had left university either to transfer or to leave higher education permanently (drop outs). In the survey, 877 respondents (about 50%) transferred to another higher education institution, while 326 students dropped out (17%). The respondents were presented with a fixed list of reasons and they had to indicate if each item had been of great importance in their decision, had been of some importance or had been of no importance. Therefore, the specific number of answers to each item is indicated in the tables. The list of reasons was inspired by previous research in the field (mainly Yorke (1999)) but adapted to fit the Norwegian context. In addition to this, the respondents that had left the institution (either to transfer to another institution or because they dropped out) were asked if the institution could have done anything to prevent them from leaving and in that case, what. In this paper, the analysis focuses on the reasons for leaving. Students who

transferred and dropped out are analysed separately and the results are contrasted with each other. In addition to this, some attention has also been paid to the institutions' capacity to influence retention rates, by analysing the responses according to the proposition that the institution could have affected the students' decision to leave.

Factor analysis was used to systemise the pattern of reasons for dropping out or transferring. This is a method of reducing many observed variables to a smaller number of hypothetical or latent variables, with the intention of making the data more easily comprehensible (Kim & Mueller, 1978, p. 9). Factor analysis is an explorative method that aims to find patterns in students' reasons for dropping out or transferring. The method used was principal axis factor analysis, with varimax rotation, which is a method aimed at producing statistically independent factors. In both analyses, the initial analysis was based only on the criterion of a minimum eigenvalue of at least 1. However, these analyses yield very many factors and, therefore, the analyses were adjusted, creating fewer factors and omitting items that did not score significantly on any of the factors. In both cases, the analyses were relatively stable in the sense that the first factor was the same regardless of whether the analysis was driven only by the criterion of an eigenvalue of at least 1 or by a fixed set of factors.

Owing to economic constraints on the data collection there are limitations to the data set. One of them is that the respondents were presented only with a fixed list of reasons for leaving; there was no open response category. However, all respondents indicated at least one reason that had been of great importance in their decision to leave, and that can be seen as a sign that all respondents could find a reason that fitted them.

A question to be raised is to what degree the results of this study may be generalised, or if they are also influenced by specific aspects of the Norwegian higher education system. The Norwegian higher education differs from many other European systems in some respects. As in the rest of Scandinavia, education is tuition-fee free and hence economic constraints may have a lower impact in Norway than in other countries. On the other hand, recent research by Yorke and Longden (2008) indicates that the influence of economic constraints might be most prominent when changes in the financial structure are implemented, that British students' now take higher tuition fees into account when they decide to enter higher education. A second important aspect of Norwegian higher education is the flexibility embedded in the possibility to transfer between different institutions, which may lead to more institutional transfers than most other higher education systems face, though, a similar pattern can be found in American higher education (Tinto, 1993). Hence, even though the Norwegian higher education system differs from other systems in some respects, the results of the study can probably be generalised.

Reasons for transferring

Respondents had to consider a list of 15 items for transferring to another institution. Many respondents specified three or more reasons that had been of great importance in their decision to transfer to another institution (Table 1). This indicates that there is a complex set of reasons why students transfer to other institutions and it is in line with Yorke and Longden's (2004) assertion that there are many reasons why students leave.

The most important reason for transferring was that the student started a new programme. Overall, 73% of respondents stated that 'starting a new programme' had been of great importance and among those who transferred to a state university college 84% declared that it had been of great importance. This is due to the fact that state university

TABLE 1. Reasons students give for transferring—reasons of great importance

Reason	% total sample selecting the reason*	<i>n</i>
Started a new programme	72.9	852
Wanted to try something new	46.3	852
University did not offer the course/programme	41.3	853
New institution had a good reputation	30.6	854
Wanted better teachers	23.3	854
For reasons of family/friends/partner	16.4	852
Wanted better information and guidance	14.1	851
An institution closer to home	13.8	854
Did not feel socially suited to university	13.6	852
Easier to get previous ed. accredited at new institution	6.8	850
Was not accepted into programme of first priority	5.1	849
Health-related problems	2.9	849
Problematic housing situation	2.3	848
Did not like living in a big city	1.9	850
For children and childcare reasons	1.7	851

Note: *respondents may choose more than one reason.

colleges offer different types of programmes from those offered by universities, mainly professional programmes (for example teaching, engineering and nursing).

'Wanted to try something new' was as important as 'starting a new programme' for students that transferred to a school abroad. According to Wiers-Jenssen (1999) a common motivation for students studying abroad is that they are seeking new experiences. Large percentages also stated that their 'new school had a good reputation' and they 'wanted better teachers'. Most of the reasons given by transferring students related directly to the courses and the institution they moved to. Hence, students transferring to another higher education institution could primarily be interpreted as a move to something, rather than from. *Pull* factors are more important than the *push* factors in the decision to transfer. However, this might also indicate flawed decision-making, which is similar to what Yorke and Longden (2004) argued is one of four main reasons for leaving. Perhaps the programmes initially chosen by students were not funded well enough, leading to a change of mind along the way and a decision to try a different programme at another institution. It might also indicate that students were undecided between two or more programmes when starting university and the university experience made them realise that they should have started the other programme.

To sort the items, a factor analysis on reasons for transferring was conducted. The initial analysis, based only on a minimum eigenvalue of 1, came out with six factors. However, for analytical purposes the number of factors was reduced to a three-factor solution and three items that did not score on any of the factors were taken out (Table 2).

The first factor is related to the *learning environment* in a broad sense: better teachers, better information and guidance, better reputation at the new institution but also the lack of social well-being. The second factor is not directly related to the university or the study programme but rather to a range of external factors that the university cannot control, while the third factor is related to the most frequently reported reason: the student wanted to *change to a new study programme* which the university did not offer. Even though the factor

TABLE 2. Factor analysis—reasons for transferring.* Principal axis factor analysis, varimax rotation

	1. Learning environment	2. External factors	3. Change to a new programme
Wanted better teachers	0.826		
Wanted better information and guidance	0.713		
Did not feel socially suited to university	0.491	0.281	
New institution had a good reputation	0.470	-0.102	
Wanted to try something new	0.333	-0.101	0.102
A school closer to home		0.580	
For reasons of family/friends/partner	-0.134	0.504	-0.269
Problematic housing situation		0.447	
Did not like living in a big city		0.369	
For children and childcare reasons		0.293	
Started a new programme	0.113		0.763
University did not offer the course/programme		-0.240	0.456
Eigenvalue	15.1	9.8	7.4

Note: *Three items are taken out of the analysis on reasons for transferring: 'Easier to get previous education accredited at new institution'; 'Was not accepted at first priority study'; and 'Health related problems'.

analysis here does not come out with the same factors as Yorke (1999), the factors deriving from this analysis resemble the categories presented by Yorke and Longden (2004).

Reasons for dropping out

There may be several different reasons why students drop out of higher education. In the questionnaire the respondents had to consider a list of 22 items. Seventeen percent of the respondents in the survey reported that they had dropped out, a total of 318 persons (weighted, the actual number of people was 307). Few respondents indicated that more than two items had been of great importance in their decision to stop studying. This might be an indication that there is usually one thing that triggers the decision to leave. At the same time, it is possible that there is a more complex set of reasons as to why students leave higher education but it is mediated through a single reason (Table 3).

The most frequent explanations as to why students dropped out were that they got a job, or that they were lagging behind in study progression due to having failed examinations, or they lost interest in their studies or received inadequate tutoring. Apart from problems related to study or combining work and study, health problems seem to be a relatively common reason for dropping out: one in eight students reported this as the reason for dropping out. About 10% also cited financial problems or that they did not feel socially suited to university. Hence, as anticipated, financial problems did not seem to be a common reason for leaving university in a higher education system with no tuition fees. Summing up, there seems to be a rather complex mix of problems faced by students who drop out, especially students in employment.

A factor analysis with an initial minimum eigenvalue of 1 resulted in seven factors. However, for analytical purposes the number of factors was reduced to a four-factor solution and two items that did not score on any of the factors were taken out of the analysis (Table 4).

The first factor contains statements about unsatisfactory teaching/teachers and tutoring, and bad learning environment, while the second factor identifies problems related to

TABLE 3. Reasons students' give for dropping out—reasons of great importance

Reason	% total sample selecting the reason*	<i>n</i>
Was employed	21.1	304
Lagged behind in study progression	18.7	307
Studies did not interest me any more	18.2	310
Inadequate tutoring	17.7	307
Did not manage to combine studies and work	16.8	305
Did not manage the unstructured student life	15.1	307
Health-related problems	12.7	305
Dissatisfied with teaching/teachers	11.8	307
Did not feel socially suited to university	10.7	305
Inadequate information and guidance	10.3	303
Financial problems	10.3	303
Did not manage to combine studies and children	8.3	306
Workload too heavy	7.7	307
Found studies too difficult	7.4	307
Did not regard the education as useful	6.9	304
Was not initially accepted at first priority studies	6.5	308
Study support denied because of failed exams	5.7	303
Bad learning environment	5.5	305
Study duration too long	5.4	308
For children and childcare reasons	4.5	303
Did not get previous education accredited	2.8	304
Friends or siblings stopped studying	1.0	303

Note: *respondents may choose more than one reason.

meeting the academic standard at university. These two factors explain most of the variance in the analysis. The last two factors illustrate issues that the university cannot control: the third factor is related to problems with childcare and the fourth factor contains items on financial situation and motivation. Motivation and financial situation are partly related, since Norwegian students can be denied support from the Student Governmental Loan Fund if they lag too much in their studies. Hence, if students do not perform well enough to pass their examinations, possibly as a result of a lack of motivation, they might also be at risk of losing their student loans and grants. The analysis of reasons for dropping out also resembles the categories of reasons presented by Yorke and Longden (2004).

In both factor analyses, dissatisfaction with the learning environment was the factor that explained most of the variance. This can be interpreted as relating to the importance of internal conditions for retention at university. By attending to teaching, tutoring and information and guidance to improve the learning environment universities might increase retention. This is also the only factor over which the university can exert a direct influence (Yorke & Longden 2004).

Can universities influence the decision to leave?

A minority of the students, 20% of the students transferring and 30% of the students dropping out, claim that the university could have done anything to prevent them from leaving. In other words, the majority of the students argue that they would have decided to leave;

TABLE 4. Factor analysis—reasons for dropping out.* Principal axis factor analysis, varimax rotation

	1. Teaching, learning environment	2. Meeting standards	3. Childcare	4. Finance and motivation
Inadequate tutoring	0.842	0.151		0.185
Dissatisfied with teaching/teachers	0.803	0.132		
Inadequate information and guidance	0.682	0.173		0.115
Bad learning environment	0.565	0.230		
Did not feel socially suited to university	0.390	0.372		
Studies did not interest me any more	0.273	0.241	-0.193	
Did not regard the education as useful	0.210			
Did not get previous education accredited	0.187	-0.110	0.182	
Was employed	-0.145			
Found studies too difficult	0.171	0.730		
Workload too heavy		0.699		0.179
Study duration too long	0.147	0.411		
Friends or siblings stopped studying	0.156	0.235	0.109	
Did not manage to combine studies and children		0.121	0.850	
For children and childcare reasons			0.738	
Did not manage to combine studies and work	-0.196	0.112	0.251	0.218
Study support denied because of failed exams				0.764
Financial problems				0.581
Lagged behind in study progression	0.213	0.413		0.427
Did not manage the unstructured student life	0.217	0.296		0.322
Eigenvalue	13.4	9.4	7.2	6.8

Note: *Two items is taken out of the analysis on reasons for dropping out: 'Was not accepted into programme of first priority' and 'Health-related problems'.

regardless of what steps the university might take to try to prevent their departure. This finding corresponds to Sharma and Burgess's (1994) finding that only 18% of the students responding to their survey thought that the university could have done anything to influence the decision to leave. In addition, this is also supported by the analyses of reasons for leaving. For the students who transferred the most important reason was 'starting a new programme' and the most common reason for leaving among students who dropped out was related to being employed. Both these reasons are external to the university, things that they cannot affect.

However, the respondents who said that the university could have affected their decision to leave were also asked what the university could have done.

The majority of both students transferring and dropping out stated that they would have preferred closer follow-up and guidance throughout their studies as well as improved teaching and instruction. Hence, there is a common response from students leaving to what the institution could have done to enhance retention and this could indicate a direction for the policies of the institution. Improvement of the social environment is reported as more important among transferring students than students dropping out. Further, a considerable proportion of the students wanted a more pre-set structure of their studies but, at the same time, other students wanted increased freedom of choice. This illustrates that the student body has diverse needs and interests.

TABLE 5. Measures students transferring and dropping out think the institution could have taken to prevent them from leaving

Measure	Transfer		Dropout	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Improving teaching and instruction	41.8	200	36.7	108
Closer follow-up of students throughout their studies	60.0	202	68.6	107
Increased freedom of choice of courses	28.6	202	20.4	106
A more pre-set structure of studies	44.2	202	38.4	103
Improvements of social environment for students	39.6	200	22.2	107

Implications

Since students' reasons for leaving university are mainly external, does that indicate that there is little to gain for universities in creating retention policies? Institutions can choose to keep ignoring their retention rate but that is not a very constructive perspective. This paper argues that even though only a few of the students departing actually claim that the university could have done anything to influence their decision to leave, universities might still improve retention by paying attention to the needs and desires of students leaving university before degree completion. In general, characteristics of the institution the student left are not very important for the decision to transfer. Yet, they are not without influence; the actual decision to move away may be influenced by dissatisfaction with teaching or guidance. For students that dropped out, one of the main reasons given was related to problems of academic achievement and motivation, which could be directly related to previous school achievement. The factor analyses identified a cluster of explanations related to dissatisfaction with teaching and guidance relevant to students both transferring and dropping out. This indicates that for students at risk of departing due to lack of motivation and academic achievement, improvement in teaching quality might reduce the risk of leaving. In addition, the findings related to the quality in teaching and guidance seems to be rather universal and support the findings of Yorke (1999) and Yorke and Longden (2004).

Given that uncertainty of choice also explains a considerable part in the departures, institutional strategies to help students make more informed choices may have an effect. In a study of one institution in the UK, Longden (2006) shows that the university can attend to the needs of students by employing a range of strategies such as providing orientation programmes and by increasing the focus on good early teaching experiences for new students. He also found that having a family member with higher education experience reduces the likelihood of dropping out. Hence, the parents with no prior experience of higher education also need some introduction when their children become students in order to encourage their child's choice to study. All of these strategies are examples of possible measures that the university can take to try to enhance retention.

According to Yorke and Longden (2004) institutions should allocate more of their teaching resources to the first year of a student's education in order to stimulate the students to develop into independent learners at the beginning of their studies (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p. 140). Zepke *et al.* (2006) argue that by offering a learning environment that encourages a high degree of activity or student effort, universities can influence a student's approach towards learning and possibly reduce the risk of student departure. The findings in this

paper indicate that even though a university retention policy might only affect a small percentage of the students leaving university, the policy could have an effect on all types of leavers if the policy includes establishing closer links between students and teachers and if it promotes a closer monitoring of students and encourages learning.

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