

Re-theorising retention in nursing programmes: the strengths and limitations of Tinto's model for professional degrees

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Abstract

Concerns about student completion of higher education (HE) programmes are common across Europe (Vossensteyn et al 2015) with the OECD setting this issue as a key indicator for international comparison (e.g. OECD 2013). On these measures, Norway has a higher than average HE withdrawal rate, while the UK's is significantly lower. However, in nursing degrees the rates of non-completion are similar, at around 25% in both countries: non-completion rates in nursing are relatively high in England and low in Norway (compared to other subjects). This forms part of a complex picture about the supply of nurses that is in focus in many countries. We start from these macro patterns in comparative data, and the acknowledgement of nursing retention as a socially important concern, and interrogate them through qualitative analyses of the experiences of nursing students in Norway and England. In England, about 50 nursing students were interviewed in 2016, while in Norway around 40 students were interviewed in 2019-2020, all using a common interview guide. This set of three papers aims to convey how nursing students perceive and meet the challenges of their degree, how they think retention could be improved and how institutional and national approaches vary. Across the papers, Tinto's model of institutional departure provides a lens to compare experiences between countries and compare wider patterns and assumptions in the retention and completion literature to the somewhat 'other' case of nursing students.

Link to conference theme

Tinto's (1993) interactional model for student departure has arguably become a 'default' conceptual framework for student retention work. This model states that students come to an institution with a certain level of commitment and a goal, and their eventual success is dependent on successful social and academic integration. The concepts of social and academic integration have near "paradigmatic stature in the study of college student departure" (Braxton 2000:2) and so shape assumptions about retention dynamics. Such an influential model runs a risk of what Macfarlane refers to as 'strategic deception': it is easy to assume this model conveys the central features of student persistence, irrespective of national context, HE institution, course type or student group. Taking a more critical approach, we focus on Tinto's central concepts of integration and commitment in our analyses of the nursing student experience in the first two papers (Sweetman et al & Thomas et al.) We question and re-frame how these concepts are understood and how this shapes their dynamics within the wider degree experience and as influences on completion. These first two papers also resonate with Phipps' call to seek out niches and opportunities for change, even in inhospitable environments. Nursing degrees are hard to adapt and tightly regulated, with set practice placements, compulsory academic modules, and typically large cohorts of students to coordinate. The cultural environment around nursing is also laden with tensions between the value of traditional caring and 'women's' work, and the crucial professional role promoted via degrees. While acknowledging the challenges to change, we suggest there is room for institutions to address several key common student concerns found across countries and sites. In the third paper, Hovdhaugen et al pushes back against another 'strategic deception' risk in this field, of falling into a polarised debate which seeks to either support or discredit Tinto's model.

Hovdhaugen argues that Tinto is useful *despite* limitations in the case of nursing, as it can ‘bridge’ the terrain of professional degrees into the large literature on non-continuation and persistence, without ignoring the difference identified in nursing degrees. With some elaboration it can offer an accessible, familiar model to communicate students’ experiences and opportunities to improve retention.

The three papers

Rachel Sweetman *et al*: *The (dis)integration of nursing students. Multiple transitions, fragmented integration and implications for retention*

Early social and academic integration of students is generally important to promote persistence and prevent early departure. This paper considers how integration plays out in degrees with extensive practice placements in clinical settings and degree programmes with large cohorts, thus effectively investigating the challenges of mass HE on persistence. The paper argues that the shifts between practice and academic sites, combined with institutional practices which encourage frequent changes of peer group, physical location and academic network, tends to interrupt integration processes and leave students in a prolonged liminal state with challenges for motivation and greater risk of leaving.

Liz Thomas *et al*: *Professional or student identity and commitment? Comparing the experiences of nursing and healthcare students with literature on student success*

The development of a student identity, and a commitment to a course, are key components of retention and success within literature on completion. This implies a linear process where identity formation takes place during the first year, and commitment develops over the duration of the course, eventually leading graduates to develop a professional identity. In the case of nurses, it seems a strong desire to become a healthcare professional is often the starting point for enrolling in HE, rather than the culmination of the course, and thus students have a strong initial commitment. However, many have a weak student identity. It is the professional identity, not student identity, which seems vital to retention and completion in this programme, but this is not actively nurtured by most nursing programmes.

Elisabeth Hovdhaugen *et al*: *Institutional scope to shape persistence and departure among nursing students: re-framing Tinto for professional degrees*

Tinto’s (1993) interactional model of student departure was initially developed for students in traditional academic degrees, at residential colleges in the US. This paper takes up Tinto as a fruitful starting point for a critical review of the aspects of the model which are more and less suitable for professional degrees: integration and commitment. It suggests that a Tinto-type model can be adjusted to offer a clear and valuable tool to inform institutional work on retention and completion in nursing and potentially in other short professional degrees. While we identified limitations in how integration functions in a nursing programme, the existing model is fairly easy to adapt to account for specific modes of professional commitment, which in turn may counteract the fragmented integration.

References

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