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Feature

In Conversation with: Professor Liz Thomas

Karen Nelson, John Clarke and Sally Kift

Abstract

Editors Karen Nelson, John Clarke and Sally Kift interview Professor Liz Thomas, Director of the Widening Participation Research Centre at Edge Hill University. Professor Thomas is also Lead Adviser, Retention and Success at the Higher Education Academy, England. Professor Thomas was one of the keynote speakers at the 15th International First Year in Higher Education Conference held in Brisbane, Australia from the 26th – 29th of June, 2012. Professor Thomas joined the Journal Editors at the conclusion of the main conference program to explore some of the key themes raised in her address.

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Feature interview - biography¹

Professor Liz Thomas

Professor Liz Thomas is Director of the Widening Participation Research Centre at Edge Hill University. She is also Lead Adviser Retention and Success at the Higher Education Academy. Liz has fourteen years experience of undertaking and managing widening participation, student experience and retention and success research, and is committed to using research to inform policy and practice at all levels. She has a strong commitment to institutional transformation to support diverse students to access and succeed in higher education, and has developed and contributed to a number of evidence-informed change programmes engaging institutional teams in planning, implementing and evaluating change.

Liz is currently directing a 3-year research and evaluation programme to improve student retention and success on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. She has recently undertaken a review of widening participation strategic assessments prepared by all English higher education institutions, and contributed to a similar review in Wales in 2009, and she

has researched male student engagement in academic development and pastoral support services. A work for 2012 includes a formative evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme, and a summative evaluation of the National STEM programme. Liz is renowned internationally for her research on widening participation and student success, and has undertaken research, consultancy and keynote addresses in Europe, the US and Australia.

Liz is author and editor of ten books on widening participation and enhancing the student experience, including Institutional transformation to engage a diverse student body (2011, Emerald Publications, with Malcolm Tight); First Generation Entrants in higher education: an international analysis (2006, SRHE and Open University Press, with Jocey Quinn); and Improving student retention in higher education: The role of teaching and learning (2007, Routledge Falmer, with Glenda Crosling and Margaret Heagney). Liz is also editor of the journal Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.



¹ This bibliographical material was extracted from information retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/keynote_speakers.html

Introduction

Professor Liz Thomas from the Higher Education Academy and Edge Hill University in the United Kingdom was a keynote speaker at the 15th International First Year in Higher Education Conference in Brisbane, Australia. Professor Thomas was very generous of her time, also running a workshop, conducting a Master Class and consenting to an informal but recorded interview with the editors and manager of this journal.

What follows is a “Q and A” style feature created by drawing on comments made by Professor Thomas during all of these activities. The aim is to highlight her views on matters central to the first year in higher education—particularly within the widening participation agenda— and to draw on her extensive research and practice in these areas.



Professor Thomas FYHE Conference 2012

Q: *What are some of the key issues and concerns around monitoring student learning and engagement?*

A: In work on raising the tertiary aspirations of pre-tertiary students in the UK, we have learnt to focus on *targeting* students, in particular under-represented groups such as lower socio-economic status students. However, at the tertiary level, I feel that it is important that we monitor the engagement and performance of *all* of our students. Monitoring is beneficial for all students and I wouldn't want institutions to be identifying and labelling students as “at-risk” simply because of their background. I think we need to be monitoring the engagement and performance of all our students, such as attendance at lectures, participation in seminars, use of the library, submission of assignments and assessment outcomes, rather than looking at their entry-level qualifications or the route they've come in tertiary education by and treating them as some sort of “at-risk” population by virtue of the fact that they come from the wrong postcode!

Q: *How do you counter the entrenched view that widening participation is a challenge to excellence and quality in higher education?*

A: In terms of changing that thinking [in the UK], our approach has been to collect and use the data.

Our recent research suggests a broad range of indicators of students' academic engagement² that can be used to monitor and track students who are coming in as 'WP students'. It's very interesting to see that the institutions who have investigated their students who have come through widening access routes or are from widening access backgrounds, have found that their outcomes challenge the somewhat conventional wisdom that there has been or is a need for some kind of dumbing-down of the curriculum or lowering of academic standards.

However, some groups are still doing comparatively poorly in terms of access, participation, retention and attainment but I think that we are starting to address those issues. In England the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) are encouraging institutions to take a whole lifecycle approach to widening participation —to join together their widening access work with their student retention activities and to look ahead to the students progression into employment and further study. In 2009 each institution prepared a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment for HEFCE, and they prepare an annual Access Agreement for OFFA detailing how additional fee income will be used to widen access and improve student retention and success. I think that is really positive because we are seeing

Access Agreements that now address not just access, but also retention and success. These Assessments and Agreements are driving whole- institution approaches. This changes the emphasis because we've always had some institutions which are poorer at access and better at retention and some which are good at widening access and poorer at retention, and there is always that tendency to blame the types of students recruited rather than the resources and practices of the institution. With whole -institution approaches,

While the students may enter higher education through a widening access route, there is a lot of the evidence pointing to the fact that we need to take a mainstream approach to improving retention. I wouldn't want institutions to be identifying students as "at-risk" simply because ... they come from the wrong postcode!

institutions have to put a proportion of their fee income into supporting widening access and student retention and success, and that allows them to make strategic decisions, based on evidence, about where they invest the balance of their spending.

I think it is critical to bring those agendas together, so we can actually say that institutions have some strengths but they also have areas in need of development and these will differ by institutional

² Throughout the conversation, a variety of indicators of engagement that could act as monitoring procedures were mentioned. They are collected here: Attendance at lectures; whether students take up the opportunities to meet with their personal tutor, whether they use the library; whether they take things out of the library; the extent to which they're submitting their assessments on time; their performance in those assessments.

You won't get anywhere unless student success and retention are taken seriously by the senior management in the institution.

context. This is far better than just seeing some institutions as “good” and some as “bad.”

Q: What is THE KEY to student engagement, success and retention?

A: Quite simply, it is just about thinking about students! You won't get anywhere unless student success and retention are taken seriously by the senior management in the institution. So while there are multiple priorities that need to be addressed, the message about the importance of student retention and success – and I would also argue, student engagement and belonging – is absolutely crucial. You need all staff across the institution to be behaving in ways that are different from the more traditional university norms of mass higher education and that's only going to come about if students are seen as the institutional priority.



FYHE Conference 2012 Master Class

If research is still seen as much more important and students seen as a poor second or third or somewhere down the line, then you are not going to see changes. You have to start by getting institutional understanding about the importance of student success and retention through student-centred learning and teaching. That seems to be happening a bit more in the current climate because the financial implications are more stark and severe than perhaps they were before: students now have much more explicit income tags attached to them than previously.

Q: What are your thoughts on staff engagement and development?

A: The issue of staff engagement is implicit in all the work that I've been doing but has not perhaps been addressed as fully as it should be ultimately. Recent findings showed that staff involved in the widening access and student success activities often feel undervalued and overworked and there are perceptions that they don't get the same opportunities for promotion. I want to extend the notion of staff development to include staff recruitment and make these responsibilities much more explicit right from the very beginning. This comes back to my earlier comment about the support for these initiatives coming right from the top. We have to build these expectations into the recruitment, interview and selection process, and annual performance monitoring and

review. Then we can focus on giving existing staff the skills to take the work forward and allowing for professional development as well.

Part of the solution is about giving staff the time to do this important work. Many staff would be willing to do this work and have the interest and right skills to bring to it but they won't do it if they are being penalised for doing student-focussed work as opposed to some of the other activities that they're required to do. Certainly one of the things that we've been very supportive of in the Higher Education Academy has been around the criteria for staff promotion around learning and teaching and student support rather than the criteria being focused solely or predominantly around research or other areas of achievement. That has to be part of it. So learning and teaching and student support has to be in workload allowances and in promotion criteria. If you think of it this way you find that staff development is probably quite a small part of a bigger picture, because staff won't really participate until they find that there's a need to do so. So it's about building that need (through attention to the promotion criteria and workload) before you can start delivering the kinds of development programs that people actually want to get involved in.

The HEA has run a number of change programs in this area and quite often the institutional teams will spend time developing staff development resources and make them available on websites. My concern with this approach is that in itself this is not going to bring about any changes in behaviour. We have got to build up the momentum for people to want to access and utilise those resources and that's clearly a very different process that

requires winning over hearts and minds. Then you can give them that technical capability to do those things. I think we can win over staff both by hard evidence and the use of student voices, and by changing the academic infrastructure of recruitment, review and promotion.

Staff involved in these activities often feel undervalued and overworked ... learning and teaching and student support has to be in workload allowances and in promotion criteria.



Professor Thomas FYHE Conference 2012

2012 FYHE Conference Keynote:

Thomas, L. (2012, June). What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education. In *15th International First Year in Higher Education Conference*, Brisbane, QLD. Retrieved from http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers12/FYHE%20Proceedings.pdf

*The key is just about
thinking about students!*

Liz Thomas 2012