

Institution: Edge Hill University		
Unit of Assessment: C23 Education		
Title of case study: Improving equity and outcomes in higher education		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Liz Thomas	Professor of Higher Education	April 2007 onwards
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Thomas' research identified the contribution of student engagement and belonging to improving student retention and attainment in higher education (HE). Her more recent research found that some specific groups, including students who commute, find it harder to engage and belong – and have poorer outcomes. An active and inclusive academic experience ameliorates the situation but requires whole-institution change. These findings, and the associated evaluation framework, have informed two fundamental aspects of the HE regulatory framework in England – Access and Participation Plans and the Teaching Excellence Framework, affecting 300 higher education providers and approximately 1.5 million undergraduate students. Macmillan Learning has built the principles into their online learning iClicker product used by more than 1,100 US institutions to promote student engagement. The learning has also informed a European Erasmus+ project working with universities in four countries, and the work of individual higher education providers (HEPs), improving student retention across UK Universities.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Thomas has researched student equity and outcomes in HE for over two decades. Earlier work framed student retention as a matter of institutional 'habitus', and crucially, institutional responsibility. Subsequent work demonstrated the contribution of student engagement and belonging and provided evidence about how institutions can improve participation and success of students from under-represented groups.</p> <p>Previous UK research about student retention identified the characteristics of students at risk of withdrawing; institutions could reduce non-continuation by avoiding recruiting these students, or through support mechanisms. Thomas' research shifts the focus from student deficits towards institutional responsibility, especially changing learning and teaching. Changes and interventions are embedded into the academic experience and develop students' sense of belonging by promoting supportive peer relations; fostering meaningful interaction with staff; developing students' knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners; and offering an HE curriculum relevant to current interests and future goals [1]. The study identified the characteristics of effective interventions, rather than identifying a single silver bullet. Subsequent research [6] examined students' academic experience of independent learning. The majority of students did not understand the purpose of independent learning, and relied on inappropriate skills from compulsory education, indicating the importance of embedding these skills and mindsets into the core curriculum to enable all students to develop as effective and successful HE learners.</p> <p>Between 2013-2017, 13 UK HEIs and 43 course teams developed, implemented and evaluated changes at both institutional and course levels informed by [1]; The work utilised an action research methodology, using mixed methods: institutional data, student survey and qualitative evidence [5]. Curricular interventions focused on extended induction, active and inclusive learning and assessment, proactive personal tutoring and embedded mentoring. The study identified specific non-traditional groups that find it more difficult to engage and belong; refined the characteristics of effective interventions that improve engagement, belonging, continuation and attainment; explored institutional-level changes required (including the availability of accessible data and staff ownership); identified the need for a whole-institution-approach; and developed an</p>		

evaluation strategy to assess the impact of changes, using Programme Theory Evaluation Tools [4].

By surveying over 17,000 students in 13 institutions on seven separate occasions over a three-year period about their engagement and belonging, it was found that male students, non-White students and disadvantaged students (including those who commute) have less good engagement and belonging [5].

Qualitative research [3] with 100 commuter students from nine HEIs found that these students prioritised aspects of their academic engagement, but not engagement in the wider student experience, particularly enhancement activities and social interaction with HE peers. These students undervalued the contribution of wider engagement to achieving their stated goals of a 'good degree' and graduate employment. Students must be engaged through the academic experience, which should incorporate elements usually reserved for activities outside of the classroom.

Understanding a whole-institution-approach was examined further utilising institutional case studies [2]; these developed essential and additional features, explored implementation through a top-down-bottom-up approach focusing on structure and culture, and proposed a self-evaluation framework.

In summary, Thomas' research has:

- Raised awareness that institutions can improve the retention and success of students from non-traditional groups by focusing on students' engagement and belonging through active and inclusive learning strategies.
- Offered evidence-informed insights into how learning, teaching and the student experience can be changed to be active and inclusive to improve student equity and outcomes.
- Promoted and operationalised a whole-institution-approach involving all departments, services and staff, not just diversity 'champions' or professional staff.
- Developed the use of programme evaluation tools: Logic Chains and Theory of Change, to evaluate the process and impact of interventions and institutional change.

3. References to the research

Outputs 1,2 and 5 are research reports; their preparation has been overseen and reviewed by advisory committees of expert peers and are available in the public domain. They have been widely downloaded, and output 1 has 713 citations on Google Scholar. Outputs 3, 4 and 6 are published in peer-reviewed journals of international standing. All projects have employed rigorous mixed methods research strategies and have been undertaken with ethical approval.

1. Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation (Undertaken 2008-2012)
<https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-final-report/>
2. Thomas, L. (2017) *Understanding a whole institution approach to widening participation*. Bristol: Office for Fair Access (Undertaken 2016)
<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112311/https://www.offa.org.uk/eqp/whole-institution-approach/>
3. Thomas, L. (2020) 'I am happy just doing the work...' Commuter student engagement and success and lessons for other equity groups, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 74:3, 290-303 (undertaken 2016) <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12243>
4. Thomas, L. (2020) Using logic chain and theory of change tools to evaluate widening participation: Learning from the *What works? Student retention and success programme*. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 22:2, 67-82 (based on research between 2013 and 2019) <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.22.2.67>
5. Thomas, L., Hill, M., O' Mahony, J. and Yorke, M. (2017) *Supporting student success: Strategies for institutional change. What works? Student retention and success programme. Final report*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation (Undertaken 2013-17)
<https://www.phf.org.uk/publications/works-student-retention-success-full/>

6. Hockings, C., **Thomas, L.**, Ottaway, J. and Jones, R. (2017) Independent learning – what we do when you're not there. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 23:2, 145-161. (Undertaken 2015) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1332031>

4. Details of the impact

This body of research has had far-reaching impact, being integrated into two national tools – the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) in the UK and Access and Participation Plans (APP) in England – each of which have been engaged with by around 300 providers, impacting on approximately 1.5 million undergraduate students. In addition, the impact has been felt internationally through integration into the Macmillan Learning iClicker product used by more than 1,100 US institutions to promote student engagement. The research has informed an Erasmus+ project delivered in four European countries, and the work of the Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland, and individual HEPs.

Informing English Higher Education Regulatory Frameworks

Thomas's research [1] informed the UK National Strategy for Access and Student Success, 2014 [A], p56, and [1, 5] informed the report to the Minister of State for Universities and Science, 2016 [B], p69-71. The body of research has since shaped the work of the Office for Students (OfS), which regulates HE provision in England. The findings have strongly informed the requirements placed on HEPs for registration and charging higher fee levels: APP and TEF. APPs apply to English HEPs, and TEF is offered UK-wide.

Guidance for HEPs to prepare APPs [C] cites research by Thomas [1] about engagement and belonging (p41), a whole institution approach [2] (p30), and evaluation [4] (p39). It notes that the *What works* programme [5] has 'lots of insight and evidence regarding evaluation of retention and success activities' (p39). The Director of Fair Access and Participation at the OfS, has provided 'a confirmatory testimony as to the impact of research undertaken by Professor Thomas with respect to the significant contribution their work has had for the development of policy and regulatory processes at the Office for Students' [D]. The Director of Fair Access and Participation states: 'Professor Thomas's research on access and participation has contributed significantly to how we shape our expectations of providers to change their behaviour, how they have responded to that and, in so doing, improvements to the experiences and outcomes of students throughout England', he also asserts that research about a whole-institution-approach to equity and success 'has sharpened our guidance to institutions (OfS 2019, p30) and the way the APPs are assessed by OfS staff'. He concludes that 'Professor Thomas' work centralising student engagement and belonging and whole provider approaches is likely to have influenced the majority of higher education providers in England.' 293 HEPs have an APP that has been assessed and approved by OfS; impact is evaluated, and progress monitored and reported annually by OfS.

Thomas was appointed as a Widening Participation expert to advise TEF 2016-19 about diversity, drawing on research to inform both the submission and the assessment processes., Vice Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University and Chair of TEF, has provided testimony [E] to the impact of Professor Thomas' contribution on the TEF process, assessment and submissions – and thus on HEPs and the student experience.

'The TEF panel and the TEF process itself have been informed by Professor Thomas's research knowledge and expertise about the relationship between student diversity and disadvantage on the one hand, and student experience and outcomes in higher education and beyond on the other. Her work was an important contributor to the evolution of the TEF assessment process and to informing institutional ratings for every institution in England and Wales, and a number in Scotland... Drawing on an extensive research base was a very valuable addition to the TEF panels... Throughout the TEF process over 300 higher education providers have been assessed, covering the majority of undergraduate students in the UK (1.5 million). The contribution of Professor Thomas to the TEF panel is therefore extensive in its reach, and significant in ensuring the process and outcomes genuinely take into account student diversity and recognise what higher education providers are doing to address equality of experience and outcomes for all students. The

legacy of this work is greater as it has informed the development of TEF processes and developed the capacity of officers and peers involved in the process. More generally, the TEF and the work of the widening participation experts has sharpened the focus of the entire sector on intersectional disadvantage and on institutional policies to build success.'

Improving student retention and success across UK Universities

Thomas's research has impacted HEPs beyond the regulatory framework. 13 UK universities and 43 academic discipline teams participated in the *What works? Student retention and success change programme* [5], implementing changes, at both the institutional and course levels, informed by [1] and effecting approximately 4500 undergraduates each year for three years. The impact of the work is reported [5] and includes improving first year continuation and attainment rates, increasing student satisfaction and reducing the number of complaints, creating better data to inform institutional change, rolling out effective interventions, and developing the capacity of staff to implement change across the institution.

Participating institutions provided testimonials of impact [F]. The University of South Wales implemented changes in computing, music technology and business, resulting in improvements in continuation and attainment in all three disciplines. Around 800 students annually have benefitted from improved retention and attainment in the Business School; in Music Technology, progression from level 5 and retention at level 6 was poor, but 'dramatically improved... to 100%'; and in Computing, 'good degree' awards improved from 11% in 2012 to 19% in 2016-17. The Head of Learning, Teaching and Student Experience concluded: 'I am confident that from my experience in seeking to establish retention improvements throughout the institution prior to participating in *What Works?*, the scale of change and the ongoing "stickiness" of the initiatives would not have remained without the clear evidence base the project enabled us to engage in.' At Ulster University, non-continuation in 2013/14 was 9.9% compared to a HESA benchmark of 8.1%; in 2015/16 this was 5.9%. 'In 2012/13, improving student retention and progression was critical for Ulster in certain discipline areas and whilst enhancements may have taken place, it is unlikely that the impact realised from participating in the *What works* project and using the evidence-base generated would have resulted if this research had not been used.' Glasgow Caledonian University concludes: 'Evaluation findings suggest that the use of co-curricular enhancements such as academic advising can contribute to the development of belongingness, engagement and confidence in students. The sustainability of the process of academic advising within the institution lies in the original roll out as a "whole of institution" approach, managed within existing organisational structures.'

International impact

Thomas was the only non-US member of the Macmillan Learning's 'Learning Research Advisory Committee', and contributed to Learning Science Foundations (LSFs), that provide guidance for designing the next-generation learning experiences, informing Macmillan Learning's product development: 'These LSFs make up the blueprints of experiences that drive better student outcomes... Dr Thomas brought a programmatic perspective that was not previously represented in our internal Macmillan team. Her work summarized the complex ecosystem of the higher ed experience and the necessity for integrated approaches to supporting student success. Her contribution was critical in helping us move the Mapworks capabilities into the iClicker product. Without her research and expertise, decisions to prioritize holistic insights into the product design would not have happened' [G]. The student engagement tool, iClicker is used by more than 1,100 US institutions to support in person and online learning.

Thomas's research [1,3,5,6], contributed to the development of an Erasmus+ project: Towards a sense of belonging in an inclusive learning environment, #IBelong. This project translates ideas of belonging into a suite of inter-related activities for course teams: Dialogue Days, Team Teacher Reflection and Community Mentoring, and involves partners in the Netherlands, Germany, Portugal and Malta. Thomas's Programme Theory Evaluation model [4] informs the evaluation [H]. In the first year of implementation (2019-20) over 600 students, 29 academic staff and 50 mentors benefitted from the pilot interventions in the partner universities. All the short-term benefits were achieved, including students getting to know peers and staff, changes to learning and teaching,

and an improved academic community and sense of belonging [H]. The evaluation model was used to identify learning to improve implementation in 2020-21. Thomas has also provided input about inclusive learning and teaching to a second ERASMUS+ project 'Social Inclusion and Academic Success of Chinese Students in EU Higher Education', working with universities in the UK, Spain, Germany, Portugal, which is moving towards implementation.

Impact of the evaluation model

In Scotland, Thomas has worked with the Quality Assurance Agency 'Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the student experience' Enhancement Theme, introducing teams from all 19 HEPs to Programme Theory evaluation tools. This resulted in evidence about the impact of the Enhancement Theme and effective processes; and developed the capacity of HEPs to evaluate learning enhancement to improve the student experience [I]. For example, the Open University in Scotland wrote, 'The evaluation tools and webinars have been hugely helpful in shaping our approach to evaluation... We will be building on this approach to using evidence and incorporating it into other work areas outwith the enhancement theme.' Similarly, Abertay University reported, 'We are carrying that through into other areas of work e.g. how to evaluate the implementation and impact of the new Learning Enhancement Strategy.'

Thomas's evaluation approach [4] has been used by universities across the UK. For example, at the University of the Arts London, 'As a result of the research, UAL is developing a strategic approach to implementing and evaluating widening participation across the colleges and central services. Individual staff and teams have developed capacity to understand, plan and implement evaluation work, and to use the evidence from Liz's research and from the evaluations to improve the quality and effectiveness of their work to widen access and improve student success in HE and beyond... We are confident that this will contribute to improved student diversity, and greater equity of outcomes within HE and beyond, than would have been possible without Liz's research and related work' [J].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. OFFA and HEFCE (2014) *National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- B. Social Mobility Advisory Group (2016) *Working in Partnership: Enabling social mobility in Higher Education*. London: Universities UK
- C. Office for Students (2019) *Regulatory Advice 6. How to prepare your access and participation plan*. 28th February 2019. Bristol: Office for Students.
- D. Director of Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students, Confirmatory Testimonial,
- E. Chair of TEF, Testimonial Statement,
- F. What Works? Student retention and success change programme testimonials from University of South Wales, Ulster University and Glasgow Caledonian University
- G. Macmillan Learning, Testimonial, 22nd December 2020
- H. *Towards a Sense of Belonging in an Inclusive Learning Environment: #Ibelong*. Erasmus+, Application form 2018 and Interim report 2020.
- I. *Evaluation of the Impact of the Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the student experience theme*. Glasgow: Quality Assurance Agency 2021
- J. University of the Arts London, Testimonial, 4th January 2021