Promoting retention across the School of Medical Sciences by providing flexible support strategies

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Background

• Retention figures over last few years suggest a number of students “dropping out” in level 3 (as high as 11%)
• Anecdotal reports suggests a major factor is “stress-related” illness
• CLSM retention and progression committee agreed that provision of support across level 3 might help reduce this loss
• Appointed “Level 3 Retention Coordinator” in 2010 - Dr Steve Tucker
• Role expanded to include level 3 and 4 in 2011

Reasons for elevated student stress in level 3

• Change in examination format from MCQ-style to essay-style
• Grades now count towards entry into level 4 (Honours) and also for Honours project ranking
• Greater work load and increasing emphasis on mechanistic understanding
• Material being taught at a faster pace and more advanced level
• An increased expectation on students for self-directed learning

Support strategy aims

• Promote awareness of the challenges at level 3
• Provide a point of contact for troubled students
• Offer advice and guidance with level 3 issues
• Establish links to other staff members & support services
• Advertise level 3 and 4 opportunities
• Create a sense that level 3 is a surmountable challenge

Support Strategy 1 – The Welcome Meeting

• For all SMS level 3 students
• Friday of Advising week
• Introduces:
  - role of Retention Coordinator
  - challenges/expectations at level 3
  - related staff
  - welcoming and friendly atmosphere
• Sets student minds at ease and begins year in a reassuring way

Support strategy 2 – The drop-in session

• Every Wednesday afternoon (accessible for students)
• Allocated room where co-ordinator is present to advise and provide help/guidance face to face
• No appointment necessary
• ~300 students attended in first year
• Spectrum of problems (academic difficulties → serious personal issues)

Support strategy 3 – MyAberdeen sites

• Provide specific advice/guidance for level 3 and 4
• Access to specific resources/support services
• Advertises key opportunities
• Discussion forum
• Level 3 - The key to level 3
• Level 4 - How to score at level 4

Summary

• Flexible and informal methods are designed to lessen the stress associated with level 3 and 4 and provide support, advice and guidance where required
• Holistic approach designed to provide face-to-face, remote and written/resource-based help at a key time in the UG degree.

Support strategy 4 – The Staff Questionnaire

• Circulated to teaching staff
• Real advice on Hons year
• Tried and tested methods
• Fascinating results
• Posted on MyAberdeen site
• Same done with level 3
• Real life resource

Most commonly accessed on these sites:
- the resources folders (red)
- the announcement area (blue)
- circulated emails (orange)