

## **StARs & StRIPEs**

(Students At Risk & Students Reaching Individual Performance Excellence)

### **The Project: A Summary of Planning, Purpose and Process**

One of the many challenges that FE colleges face is retaining and supporting students. Investigations within the College highlighted that the majority of staff were unaware of how to establish whether their students were 'at risk' of becoming an early leaver.

Gloucestershire College like many institutions has several electronic data systems for holding and processing key information, such as time tables, registers, enrolment data, and exam achievement etc. Because these data were held in discrete systems, they were only available via separate reporting mechanisms. Academic staff were only able to obtain a full picture by reference to many reports from several different data sources. In addition to this, because students often have 3 or 4 tutors in different subject areas, each of these tutors may not have been made aware of an emerging issue at the earliest opportunity (e.g. if a student had failed coursework or poor attendance).

A strategic decision had to be made to address this problem. Research by Paul Martinez, *Improving student retention: a guide to successful strategies* [Further Education Development Agency, 1997] highlighted key factors which were clear indicators of risk. As a Senior Management Team we were keen to make the data on these key risk factors available and easily accessible to all relevant people. A software application, which would have the benefits of speed and wide availability, was required.

This project was initiated to produce a software application which would identify and collate the factors which may have an effect on the retention, achievement and eventual success of students.

### **Overview**

The Colleges Management Information Systems (MIS) Director, Paul Rabbich created an in-house software application, **StARs & StRIPEs** to bring together into one web interface, the following management data: attendance and punctuality (to date); attendance and punctuality (last 4 weeks); initial assessment scores in literacy and numeracy; self declaration of additional support needs from the learning agreement; GCSE results; late enrolment; participation on the EMA scheme; application to the College 'Student Funds'; biographical factors of age, sex, ethnicity, learning difficulty and disability; previous academic record at the College and geographical factors – home ward, distance from the College and Index of Multiple Deprivation.

The system highlights students' information through a traffic light system which alerts academic teams of any of their students "at risk" through an amber or red flag. The system allows staff to record and monitor progress and make commendations for students who have performed exceptionally.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The aim was to produce a simple-to-use system which staff would be comfortable using, with minimal training and which would improve the identification of 'at risk' students. Central to the aims of the project was improved communications and data exchange between different staff groups (Lecturers, Student Support Workers, Student Managers, Attendance officers, Heads of School etc.) all of whom interact with students in different ways, and with different priorities .

The system was developed following consultation with different academic and pastoral teams who wanted an easy-to-use system for identifying students requiring greater support and a means to communicate this to other members of the immediate academic team and other support functions within the College.

### **Monitoring Procedures**

The system was introduced through a series of roadshows just before the start of the 2006-07 academic year. On the basis that this was a new initiative, there was *no* requirement for academic staff to use the system, nor importantly any strictures given on *how* to use the system. The exception to this point was the very important issue of data protection. All staff were strongly reminded that the information contained within the system was subject to Data Protection legislation and that any misuse of it would be regarded as a serious disciplinary offence. Staff were also reminded that students would, under the terms of the Data Protection Act, be able to view any information recorded about them and therefore any comments made should be able to be substantiated, if necessary, at a later date.

The first year of use was an opportunity for the system to be tested by practitioners, for good practice to be shared and new ideas incorporated. At the end of the first six months, practitioner groups such as Student Managers were asked as part of their regular meetings to identify areas of good practice and to request any enhancements.

The result of these meetings was:

- The production of a web-based version (available remotely) whereas previously it could only be accessed within the College.
- A much more sophisticated filtering system allowing staff, for example, to filter for the male 16-18 ethnic minority group within their student cohorts and to measure average attendance,

average GCSE scores, literacy scores etc. These results could then be easily compared with the whole cohort.

- The ability to indicate individual 'excellence' as well as 'cause for concern'.
- The ability to set and record medium and long term mutually agreed targets with students.

### **Outcomes and Benefits**

New systems usually have early adopters and others follow somewhat reluctantly. However, this system was adopted enthusiastically by all staff who saw the benefits, or were inspired to use it by others. The Senior Management Team has continued to support this project and has encouraged ongoing developments including links to individual target setting and tracking.

**Following the introduction of StARs, retention across the college has shown an overall improvement of 4%. In some areas this has been much higher.**

Indicative data shows retention figures for 2006/7 as a 5% improvement on 2005/6 on average and 4% above national benchmark.

		<b>GC 2006/7</b>	<b>GC 2005/6</b>	<b>National Benchmark</b>
<b>16-18</b>	<b>Level 1 learners</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>79%</b>
	<b>Level 2 learners</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>73%</b>
	<b>Level 3 learners</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>78%</b>

In the following academic areas the retention figures have been well above national benchmark with a significant increase in retention from previous year.

**Areas of excellence, indicative data shows an average of 16% improvement in retention.**

	<b>GC 2006/7</b>	<b>GC 2005/6</b>
<b>Creative Media</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>Computing</b>	<b>97%</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Arts and Design</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>70%</b>

There is a significantly improved awareness of students at risk at all levels of the organisation as a direct result of the intra- and inter-departmental communication regarding these students.

### **User Comments**

*"Donville a mature black male, was red-flagged at the start of the full-time Holistic Therapies course because he was working on night shifts and not performing well in College due to extreme tiredness and a lack of commitment. Early identification has enabled me to arrange better support for*

*Donville. He ended up achieving well and was awarded 'Student of the Year' at our Celebration evening."*

*"A low achieving student from level 1 Beauty Therapy (in the previous year before Stars was introduced) was only allowed to progress to level 2 through a special dispensation of the Student Manager and Course Manager. Because of this history of poor achievement, she was immediately flagged 'at risk – red'. The early communication of this information allowed me to support the student from the beginning of term. She worked well and achieved level 2 well and will now go onto a level 3 NVQ with no conditions attached and will start as a green on StARs."*

It is very unlikely that such a turnaround in student behaviour and eventual achievement would have been realised without the StARs & StRIPes system.

### **Dissemination and the Future**

Other colleges would benefit from this initiative: all the information used in StARs is very likely to be already available from colleges' Student Record systems. The beauty of this concept is that the most pertinent 'at risk indicator' information is collated and presented in a simple to understand and easy to use application.

The product has already been demonstrated to a number of visiting colleges who have, without exception, embraced the concept enthusiastically and in several cases have requested assistance in setting up their own versions. The software house CompassCC, producers of 'ProAchieve' amongst other very well-used educational software packages in the FE sector, have incorporated a number of the ideas from StARs into their student tracking software 'ProMonitor'.

The College is happy to release the source code of the application to interested colleges and to give advice on how to get the best use of the product based on our own experience over the last twelve months.