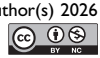
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Article

The Unequal Work of Staying: Reframing Student Agency and Continuation in Higher Education

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Sarah Yearsley

Abstract

Conventional retention measures identify whether students remain but reveal little about what remaining requires. Drawing on conceptual development from a mixed-methods doctoral study of students who seriously considered withdrawal but continued, this article advances two interconnected objectives: conceptualising the *work of staying* and examining how unequal conditions shape its demands. Five interconnected dimensions of staying work are proposed: interpretive, relational, resource-mobilising, adaptive and temporal. The *unequal work of staying* extends this framework by examining how material, relational, institutional and structural conditions generate disproportionate or avoidable demands that may remain concealed by equivalent retention outcomes. This distinction recognises that differences in effort are not inherently inequitable. The framework connects student agency with institutional responsibility, recognising students' active participation in continuation while questioning the demands institutions place upon them. Retention practice should therefore support students' agency while reducing avoidable continuation work.

Keywords

student retention, student persistence, student continuation, student agency, student success, higher education

School of Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

Corresponding Author:
Sarah Yearsley, School of Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Education Building, Maryland Street, Liverpool L1 9DE, UK.
Email: S.L.Yearsley@ljmu.ac.uk

Introduction: Looking Behind the Retention Outcome

Student retention has remained a persistent concern within higher education research and practice, generating an extensive literature concerned with why students leave, why they persist and how institutions might improve continuation and completion (Thomas, 2012; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 1993; Yorke & Longden, 2004). Yet the apparent simplicity of the difference between students who remain and those who withdraw can obscure considerable complexity. Institutional retention data ultimately record an outcome: a student continued or did not. They tell us far less about the processes preceding that outcome or about what students may have had to do to produce it.

Students who seriously consider withdrawing but ultimately continue provide an especially revealing perspective on this problem (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). Once they progress or complete, they become indistinguishable within institutional data from students for whom continuation was never seriously threatened. The periods of uncertainty preceding that outcome, the actions students undertook, the resources they mobilised and the conditions within which staying became possible can consequently become invisible within the recorded outcome. Retention may therefore constitute an equivalent institutional outcome while concealing profoundly different experiences of continuation.

This article develops from doctoral research that deliberately centred this comparatively overlooked group of students (Yearsley, 2026). The term 'saved student' was used to describe students who had seriously considered withdrawing from higher education but subsequently continued to completion. The term was not intended to imply that these students had been rescued by their institution. Rather, it developed from the recognition that students themselves were active participants in making continuation possible. Their accounts involved seeking and accepting support, drawing upon relationships and previous experiences, managing competing responsibilities, reconsidering expectations and motivations and, sometimes repeatedly, making decisions through which remaining became possible.

Foregrounding this activity connects with scholarship that increasingly conceptualises students as agents who navigate and shape their educational experiences rather than as passive recipients of institutional environments (Inouye et al., 2023; Oldac et al., 2023). It also complements relational understandings of engagement and belonging (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012) and critiques of deficit approaches that locate educational difficulty primarily in what students are presumed to lack (McKay & Devlin, 2016; Smit, 2012). However, bringing student agency into explanations of threatened continuation creates an important theoretical tension. Recognising students' participation in staying must not imply that continuation reflects greater resilience or determination, or that withdrawal reflects their absence (Le Roux, 2025). Agency is exercised within material, relational, institutional and structural conditions that shape both what actions are possible and what resources can be mobilised (Archer, 2003).

This tension is not fully resolved through the conventional distinction between retention and persistence. Retention commonly foregrounds the institution and its capacity to maintain enrolment, whereas persistence foregrounds students' continued pursuit of an educational goal (Tight, 2020; Tinto, 2012). The first can understate student agency; the second can overstate individual responsibility. Neither, by itself, adequately captures continuation as a process in which students actively negotiate staying while operating within educational conditions they did not necessarily choose or control.

The argument developed here therefore shifts attention from the eventual retention outcome towards the activity through which that outcome is produced. This forms the first conceptual objective of the article: to develop the *work of staying* as an empirically informed lens for understanding what students may do when withdrawal becomes a genuine possibility. Five interconnected forms of activity are identified: interpretive work, through which students make sense of difficulty; relational work, through which relationships are negotiated and mobilised; resource-mobilising work, through which available assets and forms of support are recognised and brought into action; adaptive work, through which participation is changed, renegotiated or challenged; and temporal work, through which past experiences, present difficulties and imagined futures are connected.

The second conceptual objective extends the first through the concept of the *unequal work of staying*. Having identified the forms of activity through which students negotiate continuation, it becomes possible to examine how the demands associated with that activity are shaped by unequal conditions. The work required to remain is not undertaken under equivalent conditions. Material circumstances, relationships, institutional environments and wider structural inequalities shape both the possibilities available to students and the demands placed upon them (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Yosso, 2005). Two students may therefore generate precisely the same institutional retention outcome while having undertaken markedly different amounts and forms of work to achieve it. However, differences in effort do not necessarily constitute inequity. The concern is with disproportionate or avoidable demands generated or intensified by institutional and structural conditions. Equivalent continuation outcomes do not necessarily represent equivalent experiences of institutional success.

The article outlines the concept's empirical foundations, examines retention and persistence language, develops the five dimensions of the work of staying and considers their unequal distribution and implications for theory, research and practice.

Empirical Origins and Conceptual Development

I developed the concept of the work of staying through continued engagement with findings from a doctoral study exploring the experiences of students who had seriously considered withdrawing from higher education but subsequently continued. Rather than beginning with students who had already withdrawn, the study deliberately focused on those whose eventual continuation concealed earlier periods in which

leaving had represented a genuine possibility. This provided an opportunity to examine continuation not simply as an institutional outcome but through students' accounts of its uncertainty.

The original study adopted a sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023) informed by a realist social constructionist position (Elder-Vass, 2012). Phase 1 involved narrative interviews conducted through instant messaging with 36 participants who had seriously considered withdrawing but continued their studies. The narrative data were analysed initially through inductive reflexive thematic analysis and subsequently in dialogue with concepts identified within existing retention and continuation literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Findings from Phase 1 informed the construction of a naturalistic Q-set for Phase 2, in which 37 participants completed a Q-sort (Watts and Stenner, 2012) exploring subjective viewpoints associated with continuation. Postsort interviews provided further qualitative insight into how participants understood and explained their viewpoints.

Through analysis across the doctoral study, I identified continuation as dynamic and multidimensional rather than attributable to a single factor or intervention. Participants described interactions between personal circumstances, belonging, relationships, engagement, institutional experiences and available forms of support. Importantly for the present argument, students were not simply positioned within these circumstances. Their accounts showed them interpreting difficult experiences, seeking or accepting support, drawing upon relationships and existing resources, modifying their participation, reconsidering expectations and repeatedly deciding whether and how continuation remained possible.

The interaction between student action and the conditions surrounding it was particularly apparent in participants' accounts of relationships. One participant, who had repeatedly considered leaving and remained deeply dissatisfied with their programme, described reaching a decision to focus upon completing the degree. Yet that decision was sustained relationally. Reflecting on their final semester, they explained that without their family's encouragement, 'I would probably have left', before describing how they ultimately remained and completed (Participant 3; Yearsley, 2026). Another participant located the significance of peers even more directly: 'if I didn't like the people I was with I would have left' (Participant 12; Yearsley, 2026). These accounts illustrate the difficulty of separating individual agency from relational conditions: students made decisions about continuing, but relationships formed part of what made those decisions possible.

I did not conceptualise these activities as the *work of staying* within the original doctoral analysis, nor were the five dimensions developed as additional themes through a subsequent recoding of the dataset. Rather, I developed the concepts presented here through poststudy engagement with the doctoral findings and with literature concerning retention, persistence, student agency and asset-based approaches. The article therefore does not claim to report a new empirical analysis or propose that the five dimensions constitute discrete variables or predictive factors. Instead, it asks what becomes visible when the activity evident across students' accounts is considered

explicitly through the question of what students do when continuation becomes uncertain.

This conceptual development was abductive, moving between the doctoral findings and scholarship on retention, belonging and student agency (Ritz, 2020). Students' accounts highlighted interpreting difficulties, negotiating relationships, mobilising support, adapting participation and reconsidering futures. Reading these activities alongside existing theory distinguished what students do from the conditions shaping their actions. This informed five overlapping analytical lenses: interpretive, relational, resource-mobilising, adaptive and temporal work, rather than additional empirical themes or predictive categories. The framework thus shifts attention from factors associated with staying to how students act with, through and in response to those factors.

From Retention and Persistence to the Work of Staying

The language used to describe whether students remain in higher education directs attention towards different actors, processes and responsibilities. *Retention*, *persistence* and *continuation* are sometimes used interchangeably, yet do not position students and institutions in equivalent ways (Tight, 2020). Retention commonly describes an institutional outcome: whether students enrolled at one point remain enrolled at a subsequent point. While valuable for monitoring participation and institutional performance, it reveals relatively little about the processes through which that outcome is produced.

This particularly matters for students who seriously contemplate withdrawal. A student who repeatedly considers leaving, renegotiates participation, mobilises support and eventually completes can generate the same retention outcome as a student whose continuation was never seriously in question. Both have been retained, yet the processes through which that outcome was reached may have been markedly different. Retention can therefore make visible whether staying occurred while rendering less visible what staying required.

The concept of *persistence* appears to address some of this limitation by directing attention towards students rather than institutions. Persistence foregrounds students' continued pursuit of educational goals and has occupied a central position within theories seeking to explain why some students remain while others leave (Tinto, 1993, 2012). More recent scholarship has further developed student-centred understandings of persistence, emphasising motivation, engagement, relationships and students' interpretations of their educational experiences. Tinto's recent reconsideration of persistence, for example, explicitly argues for examining persistence through the eyes of students and foregrounds students' goals, motivation and perceptions of their experiences (Tinto, 2025).

Recent scholarship has also increasingly attended to continuation from the perspectives of students who remain despite difficulty. Nieuwoudt and Pedler (2023), for example, explored why students stayed after considering departure, identifying personal and career goals and social support among prominent influences. Related

qualitative research has examined how students construct persistence following academic failure, demonstrating the importance of the meanings students attribute to difficult educational experiences (Ajjawi et al., 2024). Together, such studies move beyond identifying withdrawal risk towards understanding continuation from students' perspectives. The present article extends this work by shifting the focus from the factors, meanings and experiences associated with staying towards the activity involved: what students do with, through and in response to those conditions when continuation becomes uncertain.

Persistence nevertheless carries conceptual risks because it can imply individual endurance. When associated with resilience, determination or motivation, it may return responsibility to students: those who remain appear sufficiently resilient or engaged, while withdrawal is read through the absence of these qualities (Le Roux, 2025; Slater, 2022). This sits uneasily with critiques of deficit approaches that recast educational inequalities as student deficiencies (McKay & Devlin, 2016; Smit, 2012).

The distinction can be expressed simply: retention can understate student agency, while persistence can overstate individual responsibility. The former risks positioning the institution as the actor that successfully retains; the latter risks positioning the student as the actor who must successfully endure. *Continuation* offers useful conceptual room between them because it describes an outcome without necessarily attributing it to either institutional retention activity or individual persistence. Yet continuation alone still tells us relatively little about the processes through which remaining becomes possible.

Student agency provides one means of addressing this gap. Students do not merely experience educational environments; they interpret them, respond to them and, within varying constraints, act upon them (Archer, 2003; Inouye et al., 2023; Oldac et al., 2023). Agency is nevertheless situated: material circumstances, prior educational experiences, relationships, institutional practices and wider inequalities can expand or restrict available courses of action (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022; Engel, 2025). The question is therefore not simply whether students demonstrate agency, but how agency is exercised when continuation becomes uncertain.

Relational approaches to student continuation provide an important foundation for this perspective. Earlier work by Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) conceptualised non-completion as the culmination of a complex process of student–institution interaction rather than as a problem located solely within the student. More recent relational approaches similarly conceptualise student experience as emerging through dynamic interactions between student and institutional factors (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), while belonging scholarship demonstrates that continuation is shaped through relationships, connection and students' experiences of their educational environments (Thomas, 2012). Such perspectives move beyond explanations located wholly within either the student or the institution. Nevertheless, identifying relationships, belonging, support or engagement as factors associated with continuation does not necessarily make visible the activity through which students interact with them. A supportive relationship illustrates this: its presence may provide an important condition for

continuation, but that relationship does not automatically become significant simply because it exists (De Clercq et al., 2018). Students may still need to recognise support as relevant, decide whether and how to access it, and incorporate it into subsequent decisions and actions. The same applies to institutional provision: availability alone does not explain how support becomes meaningful within continuation (Thomas, 2021). The distinction is therefore between identifying conditions associated with continuation and examining the activity through which students engage with those conditions. The latter is the conceptual territory occupied by the *work of staying*.

The language of *work* is deliberate. It makes visible activity that can disappear when continuation is understood only as an outcome or persistence as an individual disposition. Work does not imply that students alone are responsible for producing continuation, nor that remaining should always be regarded as the desirable outcome. Rather, it directs attention towards the interpretive, relational and practical activity that may become necessary when withdrawal represents a genuine possibility. It also permits a further question that conventional retention measures cannot readily answer: how much work is being required, of whom, and under what conditions?

The *work of staying* therefore builds upon rather than rejects student-centred developments in persistence theory. Recent efforts to understand persistence through students' perspectives represent an important shift away from institution-centred explanations (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023; Tinto, 2025). The framework developed here brings these insights together around activity, conceptualising continuation as something students actively negotiate through their encounters with relationships, resources, educational practices and structural conditions. This activity is neither wholly individual nor wholly institutional.

Locating the 'Saved Student'

I developed the term 'saved student' to describe students who had seriously considered withdrawing from higher education but subsequently continued to completion (Yearsley, 2026). Their eventual outcome places them among those who successfully continue, concealing periods during which withdrawal represented a genuine possibility. Their experiences therefore provide a useful vantage point from which to look behind the retention outcome and examine how continuation was negotiated.

The use of *saved* was deliberately provocative rather than intended to suggest that students had been rescued by their institution. Analysis of students' accounts challenged such a straightforward interpretation. Participants remained present within their accounts as decision-makers and interpreters: seeking or declining support, deciding whose advice to trust, drawing upon relationships and previous experiences, reassessing what university meant to them and deciding to continue despite having seriously contemplated leaving. This activity foregrounded student agency within experiences that might otherwise be represented principally as successful institutional retention.

However, recognising students as active participants does not attribute continuation to individual agency alone. Their possibilities for action were shaped by available

relationships, resources and institutional conditions (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2021). Student agency and institutional support are therefore not competing explanations: support may itself become a resource through which agency is enabled (Kellogg, 2024).

Saving oneself does not mean saving oneself alone, nor does the term imply that students who withdraw lack agency, resilience or determination. Withdrawal may itself be agentic, and remaining is not automatically the preferable decision. The value of the 'saved student' lies in making visible how continuation becomes possible when leaving is a realistic alternative.

The 'saved student' is therefore not proposed here as a new institutional classification or as an alternative category for retention monitoring. Rather, these students provide a conceptual vantage point from which to examine something that the eventual continuation outcome can obscure: the activity undertaken between considering leaving and ultimately remaining. It is this activity that the concept of the *work of staying* seeks to make visible.

The Work of Staying

Focusing on students who had seriously considered withdrawal draws attention to a contrast between the conditions associated with continuation and the activity through which students respond to those conditions (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). Existing retention research has identified a wide range of influences upon continuation, including belonging, engagement, relationships, motivation and institutional support (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012; Tight, 2020; Tinto, 2012). These perspectives are important for understanding the conditions within which continuation occurs. However, identifying a factor as supportive does not necessarily explain how that factor becomes significant within a student's decision and capacity to remain.

The work of staying directs attention to this intervening activity. Work does not imply employment, measurable effort or a burden students should be expected to undertake; it makes visible the interpretive, relational and practical activity through which continuation is negotiated. The analytical question shifts from what factors are associated with staying to what students do with, through and in response to surrounding circumstances, relationships and resources.

Five interconnected dimensions of this activity are proposed: *interpretive*, *relational*, *resource-mobilising*, *adaptive* and *temporal work*. These dimensions are neither stages through which students' progress nor variables intended to predict retention. They provide an empirically informed conceptual vocabulary for examining different but overlapping forms of activity through which students may participate in making continuation possible. Their analytical value lies not in replacing established explanations of retention but in making visible processes that can sit between the conditions students encounter and the continuation outcomes subsequently recorded.

Interpretive Work

Continuation involves interpretation as well as response. Experiences such as academic difficulty, disappointing assessment, uncertainty about belonging or conflict between

study and other responsibilities do not carry fixed meanings. Students interpret what those experiences signify about themselves, their place within higher education and the feasibility or desirability of continuing (Ajjawi et al., 2020, 2024). A poor assessment outcome, for example, may be interpreted as temporary difficulty, evidence that a different approach is required, or confirmation that the student does not belong within university. The event itself therefore cannot fully explain its consequences for continuation.

Interpretive work describes the activity through which students make sense of experiences that place continuation under pressure. This can involve reassessing expectations, distinguishing temporary difficulty from perceived incompatibility with higher education, reconsidering the meaning of academic setbacks or reconstructing understandings of what successful participation looks like. Such interpretations may themselves change over time and through interaction with others.

This extends retention explanations concerned with motivation, self-efficacy or belonging by drawing attention to how students actively construct the meaning of experiences through which those orientations may be reinforced, destabilised or reconstructed (Ajjawi et al., 2020, 2024). Students do not simply possess more or less belonging, motivation or confidence; these orientations are themselves shaped through students' interpretations of educational experiences (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Interpretive work therefore provides one mechanism through which apparently similar educational experiences may produce different implications for continuation.

Relational Work

Relationships with peers, academic staff, family members and others are well established within research on belonging, engagement and student continuation (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012, 2021). The *work of staying* does not challenge the significance of these relationships but asks how they become consequential. Relationships may be available within an educational environment through tutors, academic advisers, peer mentors and other students, but students also participate in establishing, negotiating and sustaining those relationships (Hagler et al., 2025; Sapiro et al., 2025).

Relational work may involve deciding whether to disclose difficulty, identifying someone who appears trustworthy, approaching an academic, accepting assistance, maintaining peer connections or negotiating study alongside relationships and responsibilities outside the university (Hagler et al., 2025; Sapiro et al., 2025; Thomas & Jones, 2017). The availability of a potentially supportive relationship is therefore distinct from the processes through which that relationship becomes usable. Notably, relational work should not be interpreted as transferring responsibility for belonging to students. Institutions shape whether opportunities for meaningful relationships exist, who has access to them and whether educational environments make help-seeking and disclosure possible without stigma or excessive risk (Sapiro et al., 2025; Thomas, 2021). Rather, the concept highlights the interaction between relational provision and student participation. Seeking and accepting support can itself constitute agency. As argued earlier, saving oneself does not mean saving oneself alone.

Relational work therefore adds a process dimension to established relational accounts of retention. Its distinctive focus is on how students establish, negotiate and sustain relationships, including the trust, disclosure and connection through which those relationships become supportive. Although relationships may also provide resources, relational work foregrounds the interpersonal processes involved rather than the mobilisation of support itself.

Resource-Mobilising Work

An asset-based perspective redirects attention from what students are presumed to lack towards the knowledge, capabilities, experiences, relationships and resources they already possess or develop through participation in higher education (Grabsch et al., 2025; McKay & Devlin, 2016; Smit, 2012). Recent research similarly demonstrates the potential significance of students' internal and relational resources, with psychological capital and perceived social support associated with reduced burnout and improved academic outcomes (Schloemer & Deeg, 2026). Students encountering threats to continuation do not arrive at those moments empty-handed. They may draw upon previous educational experiences, family and peer relationships, professional identities, personal knowledge, aspirations or earlier experiences of negotiating difficulty (Koutsouris et al., 2021; O'Shea et al., 2024). Yet possessing or having access to a resource is not equivalent to being able to use it. *Resource-mobilising work* describes the activity through which students identify, access and bring resources into action in response to threats to continuation.

Institutional support can form part of this process; however, the existence of a service does not guarantee its mobilisation (Kellogg, 2024; Thomas, 2021). Students may need to know that provision exists, recognise that it is relevant to their circumstances, understand how to access it, trust those providing it and regard themselves as sufficiently entitled to seek assistance (Gravett & Kinchin, 2020; Hagler et al., 2025). Therefore, institutional accounts can treat the provision of support as evidence that a resource is available, whereas the work-of-staying perspective asks whether that resource can actually become usable within students' lives. A resource that technically exists but cannot readily be recognised, accessed or incorporated into action may have limited consequences for continuation.

Resource-mobilising work therefore shifts attention from resource availability to usability. Unlike relational work, its analytical focus is on how students recognise, access and put resources into action, whether those resources are interpersonal, institutional or personal. Support can enable agency, while institutional design can either reduce or increase the work required to mobilise it.

Adaptive Work

Persistence can evoke maintaining a course of action despite adversity. Yet continuation may depend not upon doing the same thing for longer but upon changing how

participation is organised, reflecting the dynamic processes of adjustment through which students negotiate university experience (De Clercq et al., 2018; Morgan, 2022). Students may revise expectations, alter study practices, reprioritise competing responsibilities, accept forms of support previously resisted, renegotiate relationships or reconsider what successful participation in higher education looks like.

Adaptive work describes adjustments to how students organise and negotiate their participation, distinguishing changes in practice from the interpretation, relationship-building or resource mobilisation that may accompany them. Agency may involve changing one's own practices, but it can also involve negotiating, resisting or challenging the conditions surrounding participation. This differentiation is necessary if an asset-based account of continuation is to avoid becoming another language through which responsibility for overcoming institutional barriers is placed upon students. Kahu and Nelson's (2018) educational interface is useful here because it conceptualises student experience through dynamic interactions between student and institutional factors rather than treating engagement as a stable individual characteristic.

Adaptive work similarly positions continuation as responsive and negotiated. Although adjustment may involve interpretive, relational or resource-mobilising work, its distinctive focus is on changes to how students participate. What enables staying at one point may become insufficient at another, requiring participation to be reorganised as circumstances change (Kellogg, 2024; Morgan, 2022). Continuing does not necessarily mean enduring unchanged; staying may become possible because students change their practices, expectations or what they are prepared to challenge.

Temporal Work

Finally, the work of staying is temporal. Decisions about continuation do not occur independently of what has preceded them or what students imagine might follow. Students enter higher education with educational biographies, expectations, identities and relationships that shape how subsequent experiences are interpreted (Jones et al., 2021; Morgan, 2022). At moments when withdrawal becomes possible, they may also draw upon imagined futures: completing a qualification, entering a profession, fulfilling personal aspirations or avoiding anticipated consequences associated with leaving (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023; Oldac et al., 2023).

Temporal work describes the activity through which students connect these past, present and future orientations. Previous experiences can provide resources for interpreting current difficulties but can also intensify them (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021). Earlier educational exclusion or academic disappointment, for example, may shape the significance attributed to a contemporary setback (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022; Engel, 2025). Equally, previous experiences of overcoming difficulty may provide a narrative through which present challenges become understood as manageable (Le Roux, 2025).

Future orientations can similarly become resources for continuation, with imagined and possible futures shown to shape students' educational aspirations and persistence (Barg et al., 2020; Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021). Students may reconnect present

difficulty with longer-term aspirations, reconsider the significance of temporary challenges or reconstruct the future they associate with remaining. Continuation can therefore involve sustaining or rebuilding a future in which staying continues to make sense.

This temporal dimension complicates approaches that locate threats to continuation primarily within the immediate circumstances in which they become visible. The moment at which a student considers leaving may be the product of a much longer educational biography, while the decision to remain may depend partly upon futures that have not yet occurred. Temporal work therefore situates continuation within an unfolding trajectory rather than treating it as a sequence of isolated retention decisions.

Interconnecting the Dimensions

The five dimensions should not be understood as discrete forms of behaviour or as a sequence through which students move. They are analytically distinguishable but likely to operate recursively and simultaneously. Seeking support, for example, may involve interpreting a difficulty as something for which help is appropriate, deciding whether to disclose that difficulty within an existing or potential relationship, mobilising support through that relationship, adapting subsequent participation and reconnecting immediate difficulty with longer-term aspirations. A single episode may therefore involve several forms of *work*. This interconnectedness is important because the framework is not intended to produce another checklist of factors associated with retention. Its purpose is different. The *work of staying* focuses attention on the processes connecting students, circumstances and outcomes. It therefore introduces a different set of questions into retention research. Rather than asking only whether students possess certain characteristics, encounter particular experiences or access specific interventions, it asks how students interpret those experiences, how relationships and resources become actionable, how participation is renegotiated and how continuation is situated across time.

Together, the dimensions conceptualise continuation as active and recursive, offering overlapping analytical perspectives on students' activity rather than separate categories of behaviour. As Figure 1 illustrates, these forms of work operate within material, relational, institutional and structural conditions that shape both students' possibilities for action and the demands of staying. These surrounding conditions are not additional dimensions of work but influence how the five dimensions are experienced and enacted.

Figure 1 presents the work of staying not as a linear pathway to retention but as recursive and overlapping forms of activity situated within the conditions of students' participation. Importantly, those conditions shape not only whether continuation is possible but also how much and what forms of work continuation requires. This raises a further question: whether the work of staying is distributed equally across students.

The Unequal Work of Staying

Conceptualising continuation as involving work raises a further question: is the work required to stay distributed equally? Students do not encounter higher education from

equivalent starting points, nor do they experience equivalent material circumstances, relationships, institutional environments or structural conditions (De Clercq et al., 2018). Consequently, although the dimensions of the *work of staying* may provide a common conceptual vocabulary for examining threatened continuation, the amount, form and intensity of that work cannot be assumed to be the same for all students. As an example, two students who remain enrolled ultimately generate the same categorical outcome: both are retained. Yet reaching that outcome may have required markedly different amounts and forms of activity. For one student, continuation may be relatively unproblematic, supported by financial security, established confidence, accessible relationships and institutional practices that align with their circumstances. For another, the same outcome may depend upon repeatedly interpreting and managing difficulty, seeking support, negotiating competing responsibilities, mobilising limited resources and adapting participation in response to institutional demands. The outcome is equivalent; the work through which it is produced is not.

The unequal work of staying makes this distinction visible, although differences in effort do not necessarily constitute inequity. Educational participation inevitably involves challenge, and some demands contribute meaningfully to learning and development. The concern here is with disproportionate or avoidable continuation work generated or intensified by institutional and structural conditions. Outcome inequalities remain important (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022), but focusing only on differential outcomes can obscure inequalities within successful continuation. Inequality can therefore lie not only in who stays, but in what staying requires.

Material Conditions and the Work of Staying

Material circumstances can directly shape the amount of work associated with continuation. Financial pressures and the need to combine study with other demands can affect students' capacity to remain engaged and have been associated with persistence and retention outcomes (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022; Smathers et al., 2024). Financial pressure, employment, housing and caring responsibilities may constrain the time and resources students can devote to study while simultaneously creating additional demands that must be negotiated alongside academic participation. These conditions do not simply operate as background 'risk factors'; they can alter what forms of action are possible and increase the adaptive, resource-mobilising and temporal work required to remain. Financial pressure may require a student to increase paid employment, which can subsequently reduce opportunities for campus participation, affect relationships with peers and staff and require study to be reorganised around employment commitments (Smathers et al., 2024). Therefore, what might be recorded as a single financial challenge can generate activity across several dimensions of the work of staying. As such, material conditions shape not only whether continuation is threatened but the work students must undertake in response.

Relational Conditions and the Work of Staying

The work required to continue is similarly shaped by students' relational environments. Students with readily available networks of family, peers or academic staff may be able

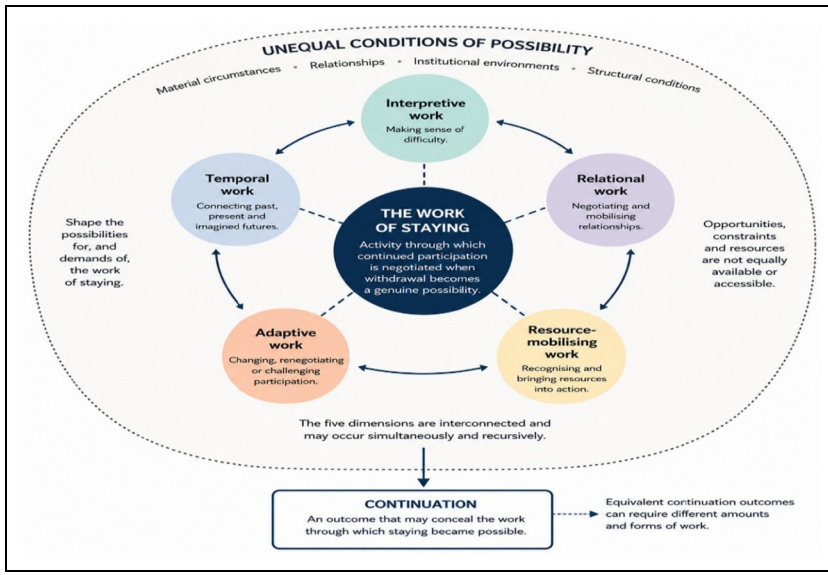


Figure 1. The work of staying: five interconnected dimensions situated within unequal conditions of continuation.

to mobilise support with comparatively little difficulty (Yearsley, 2025). Others may need first to identify potentially supportive relationships, establish trust, disclose difficulties or navigate uncertainty about whether asking for help is legitimate, with research showing that help-seeking is itself shaped by relational, contextual and resource-related conditions rather than being a purely individual decision (Hagler et al., 2025; Sapiro et al., 2025).

Relational inequality is therefore not captured simply by asking whether support exists. The accessibility, quality and usability of relationships matter. A student surrounded by people but unable to identify a relationship in which vulnerability feels possible may undertake considerably more relational and interpretive work than a student for whom trusted support is readily available (Sapiro et al., 2025). Equally, relationships outside the institution may simultaneously support continuation and create competing responsibilities that must themselves be negotiated (Thomas & Jones, 2017; Yearsley, 2025). This reinforces the contrast between support being present and support being usable. Institutions cannot assume that making relational support formally available distributes its benefits equally (Morgan, 2022; Tinto, 2025).

Institutional Conditions and the Work of Staying

Institutions can also increase or reduce the work required of students. Administrative systems, assessment practices, communication, curriculum organisation, personal

tutoring and student-support processes all shape how easily students can navigate periods in which continuation becomes uncertain. Research emphasises that institutional environments differ in the extent to which they create conditions conducive to student success, while students' engagement with support can itself be shaped by barriers surrounding help-seeking and access (Engel, 2025; Sapiro et al., 2025). Where expectations are transparent, support is accessible and relationships are proactive, some of the work involved in recognising difficulties and mobilising resources may be reduced (Morgan, 2022; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). Where systems are fragmented, expectations are implicit or responsibility for identifying and navigating support falls primarily upon students, considerably more work may be required (Sapiro et al., 2025; Thomas, 2021).

Institutional conditions can therefore increase or reduce continuation work. Asset-based approaches are valuable when they recognise students' capacities and resources, but problematic when students must become ever more resilient, help-seeking or adaptable to navigate preventable barriers. Recognising assets should illuminate how student capacities interact with educational environments, not make students compensate for institutional shortcomings (McKay & Devlin, 2016; O'Shea, 2016).

Structural Conditions and the Work of Staying

The unequal work of staying also extends beyond individual institutions. Students' experiences of higher education are situated within wider social and educational inequalities, with socioeconomic position and other forms of disadvantage shaping both participation and the resources students can mobilise within higher education (Belando-Montoro et al., 2022; O'Shea, 2016). Prior educational opportunities, socioeconomic circumstances, disability, caring responsibilities and other dimensions of students' lives can shape both the resources available to them and the institutional environments they encounter. These conditions can influence whose knowledge is recognised, which circumstances align most readily with dominant assumptions about student participation and who is required to adapt most substantially in order to remain (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Yosso, 2005).

Recognising structural conditions is essential if the *work of staying* is not to become an individualising account of continuation. Students exercise agency, but they do so from different positions and with unequal possibilities for action (Archer, 2003). The question is therefore not whether students are sufficiently agentic to remain. It is how educational and social conditions shape the forms and intensity of agency that students are required to exercise.

This perspective also complicates celebratory accounts of resilience. Students may demonstrate considerable resilience in navigating difficult circumstances, but the capacity to undertake extensive work to remain should not be confused with evidence that requiring such work is educationally acceptable (Le Roux, 2025; Slater, 2022).

Equivalent Outcomes, Unequal Experiences

The concept of unequal work therefore creates a challenge for conventional understandings of retention success. A student who remains after undertaking substantial interpretive, relational, resource-mobilising, adaptive and temporal work will ultimately appear within institutional data as a successful continuation outcome. Yet that outcome alone cannot tell us whether the educational environment enabled continuation or whether the student remained partly despite the demands produced by that environment. This does not diminish the importance of retention measures. Such measures remain essential for identifying patterns of continuation and inequalities between student groups. Rather, the *unequal work of staying* highlights something those measures cannot readily capture: equivalent retention outcomes may conceal unequal experiences of producing those outcomes. This has implications for how institutional success is understood. If two students remain but one has been required to undertake substantially greater or more complex work because support was difficult to access, expectations were unclear or educational practices failed to accommodate their circumstances, it is insufficient to regard the identical outcome as evidence of an identical institutional achievement. Consequently, continuation can coexist with significant institutional difficulty.

The *unequal work of staying* therefore redirects attention from retention as an endpoint towards the conditions under which continuation is produced. It asks not only whether students remain, but also what remaining demands of them, why those demands differ, and which demands higher education institutions have the capacity and responsibility to reduce. This does not require universities to remove all challenge from higher education, nor does it imply that continuation should involve no student effort. Intellectual challenge, independence and the negotiation of difficulty are integral to higher education.

The relevant distinction is between productive educational challenge and avoidable continuation work: activity generated not by meaningful intellectual development but by inaccessible systems, unclear expectations, difficult-to-navigate support, exclusionary practices or structural disadvantage. Recognising that distinction moves the *work of staying* beyond an account of student agency towards a framework for examining institutional responsibility. The question for retention practice is no longer simply how institutions can help students become better able to stay. It is also how institutions might create conditions in which students are required to undertake less avoidable continuation work to do so.

Limitations

The framework should be interpreted considering its empirical and conceptual origins. It represents poststudy conceptual development from doctoral research intentionally focused on students who had seriously considered withdrawal but ultimately continued (Yearsley, 2026). The five dimensions were not produced through a new recoding of the dataset and should therefore be understood as theoretically informed conceptual

propositions rather than empirically validated categories. Although presented as analytically distinguishable, they are likely to operate recursively and simultaneously, and further empirical research is needed to examine their boundaries, intersections and potential additional dimensions.

The retrospective character of the underlying accounts also requires consideration. Students made sense of periods of threatened continuation from a position in which they had subsequently remained. Their interpretations of what enabled continuation may therefore have been shaped by later experiences and by knowledge of their eventual trajectory. Longitudinal research conducted while continuation is uncertain would provide an important means of examining how the work of staying develops, changes or becomes unsustainable over time.

The original study's deliberate focus on students who remained creates a further boundary. The framework cannot establish whether similar forms of work characterise the experiences of students who ultimately withdraw, whether withdrawal follows the exhaustion or inaccessibility of particular resources, or when leaving represents an agentic judgement that continuation is no longer desirable. Including students with different continuation trajectories is particularly important if the concept is to avoid inadvertently positioning staying as inherently preferable to leaving.

Ultimately, the unequal work of staying is proposed as a conceptual rather than predictive or measurement framework. The present article does not establish how the amount, intensity or consequences of continuation work might be operationalised or compared between students. Greater amounts of continuation work should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of greater individual resilience or commitment, nor do differences in effort necessarily establish inequity. Further research is needed to investigate how different forms of work are generated by material, relational, institutional and structural conditions, and whether some forms of continuation work are productive while others represent avoidable demands that institutions have the capacity to reduce. The framework should therefore remain open to empirical testing, refinement and challenge across different students, institutions and educational contexts.

Implications for Retention Theory, Research and Practice

The work of staying and unequal work of staying do not replace established explanations of persistence or propose new predictive variables. They redirect attention from characteristics, factors and outcomes towards processes, asking not only whether students stay and what is associated with staying, but also what they are required to do to make staying possible.

Implications for Retention Theory

The first implication concerns the relationship between student agency and institutional responsibility. Retention theory has progressively moved beyond explanations centred solely upon individual student characteristics, recognising the importance of engagement,

belonging, relationships and interactions between students and educational environments (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, 2012, 2021; Tinto, 2012, 2025). The *work of staying* builds upon this relational turn by foregrounding the activity through which students interpret and respond to those environments, providing a way of holding together two positions that can otherwise appear contradictory. Students can be understood as active agents in their continuation without assuming that continuation is principally their responsibility. Equally, recognising institutional and structural constraints need not position students as passive recipients of educational conditions. Agency and structure are instead mutually implicated: students act within conditions that shape what actions are possible, while their actions may involve navigating, mobilising, adapting to or challenging those conditions (Archer, 2003; Groenewald & le Roux, 2023).

The framework therefore suggests that continuation might be conceptualised not only as an outcome associated with identifiable factors but as a negotiated accomplishment. At moments when withdrawal becomes a genuine possibility, staying may need to be repeatedly produced through interpretive, relational, resource-mobilising, adaptive and temporal activity. This shifts theoretical attention from the presence of specific retention factors towards the processes through which those factors become consequential within students' lives. The *work of staying* therefore provides an analytical space between the conditions associated with continuation and the continuation outcome itself, directing attention towards the activity through which one may become consequential for the other.

The *unequal work of staying* adds a further dimension by distinguishing between outcome inequality and process inequality. Outcome inequality is visible where continuation or completion rates differ between students or groups. Process inequality may remain present even where outcomes are apparently equivalent. Students who ultimately continue may nevertheless encounter disproportionate or avoidable demands arising from unequal institutional and structural conditions, even where their continuation outcomes are equivalent. This also complicates the assumption that retention itself necessarily demonstrates successful institutional support. Tinto (2017) has previously questioned the conflation of institutional retention with student persistence by emphasising the differing perspectives and interests they represent. The present framework extends that concern by asking what may remain invisible even when continuation occurs. An institution can report strong retention outcomes while some students experience substantial and potentially avoidable work to remain.

Implications for Retention Research

For retention research, established questions about predictors, persistence factors and interventions (Tight, 2020; Tinto, 2012) can be complemented by examining the processes through which students negotiate threatened continuation.

Future research could therefore ask:

- What forms of interpretive, relational, resource-mobilising, adaptive and temporal work become visible at different points in students' trajectories?

- Under what circumstances does work become necessary, and which institutional practices increase or reduce it?
- How do different forms of work interact when continuation becomes uncertain?
- How does the work of staying vary across students' material, educational and social circumstances?
- Can apparently successful continuation conceal substantial process inequality?
- At what point might the work required to remain become unsustainable, and how might this relate to decisions to withdraw?

Because staying is dynamic, recursive and partly invisible within eventual outcomes, longitudinal qualitative research could examine how interpretations, relationships, resources and decisions change through periods of uncertainty. Mixed-methods research could investigate relationships between conditions, forms of work and outcomes, while quantitative work could test whether aspects of the framework can be operationalised without losing its relational character.

Implications for Retention Practice

For institutions, the framework shifts the focus from asking, 'how can we help this student stay?' to 'what work is this student having to do to stay, and which parts of this work could the institution reduce?' Retention initiatives can add work when students must identify support, locate information, make contact, repeat their circumstances and navigate disconnected structures. Support availability therefore does not guarantee ease of access.

A work-of-staying perspective would therefore encourage institutions to consider not only the availability of support but its usability. Proactive personal tutoring, transparent communication, accessible curriculum design, coherent referral processes and meaningful relationships between students and staff may matter partly because they reduce the work students must undertake before support becomes actionable. The practical objective is not to remove student agency but to create conditions in which agency can be exercised without avoidable institutional friction.

This has implications for asset-based approaches. Recognising students' strengths, relationships and resources offers an important alternative to deficit models that define students primarily through perceived risk or lack. However, asset-based practice becomes problematic if it simply asks students to mobilise more of their own resources to overcome unchanged structural or institutional barriers. The purpose of recognising assets should not be to produce students who are increasingly capable of tolerating difficult conditions. Instead, the *unequal work of staying* suggests a reciprocal institutional responsibility. Institutions can seek to strengthen students' opportunities for agency while simultaneously examining where their own practices generate avoidable work. This might involve asking whether students must repeatedly disclose the same circumstances, whether accessing support requires excessive procedural knowledge, whether curriculum expectations remain unnecessarily implicit, whether opportunities

to form supportive relationships depend heavily upon student confidence and initiative or whether institutional definitions of engagement assume forms of participation that are more accessible to some students than others.

Developing students' internal resources may have important benefits for well-being, academic performance and persistence, with recent research demonstrating the potential value of psychological capital and perceived social support (Schloemer & Deeg, 2026). A *work of staying* perspective does not reject such approaches but situates them within a wider institutional context: strengthening students' capacities should not substitute for examining conditions that generate avoidable continuation work.

The division between productive educational challenge and avoidable continuation work is important here. Higher education should involve intellectual challenge, the development of independence and encounters with unfamiliar ideas and practices. The argument is not that students should experience no difficulty or effort. Rather, institutions should distinguish between work that contributes meaningfully to learning and development and work generated by preventable administrative, relational or structural barriers. Viewed in this way, the practical challenge is not simply to help students become better able to persist, but to examine the conditions under which persistence is being required. A work-of-staying perspective therefore encourages institutions to consider: *What students had to do to remain, who bore the responsibility for the work, and whether some of those demands could have been avoided?*

Conclusion: From Retaining Students to Enabling Continuation

The 'saved student' was initially used to describe students whose experiences can become largely invisible within conventional measures of continuation: those who seriously considered withdrawing from higher education but ultimately remained and completed their studies. Attending to these students offers more than an opportunity to identify another group within the continuation literature. It provides a vantage point from which to reconsider continuation itself by making visible activity that can disappear once the eventual outcome is recorded as successful retention.

To articulate this activity, the article has proposed the *work of staying* as an empirically informed conceptual lens. Interpretive, relational, resource-mobilising, adaptive and temporal work describe interconnected forms of activity through which students may make sense of difficulty, mobilise relationships and resources, renegotiate participation, and connect past experiences and present difficulties with futures in which continuing remains meaningful. Rather than constituting sequential stages or predictive factors, these dimensions shift attention from identifying what is associated with continuation towards understanding what students do with, through and in response to the conditions they encounter.

Crucially, this work is not undertaken under equivalent conditions. The concept of the *unequal work of staying* draws attention to process inequality alongside outcome inequality, recognising that differences in effort are not inherently inequitable.

Rather, the concern is with disproportionate or avoidable continuation work generated or intensified by unequal institutional and structural conditions. Equivalent continuation outcomes therefore do not necessarily represent equivalent experiences of institutional success. A student may complete it while simultaneously having encountered an educational environment that made staying considerably harder than it needed to be.

Recognising this unequal work reconnects student agency with institutional responsibility. Students can be active participants in making continuation possible without continuation becoming their responsibility solely. Equally, recognising institutional and structural constraints need not position students as passive recipients of educational conditions. The critical challenge is to hold both together: what students do matters, but so do the conditions that shape what they are able and required to do.

The 'saved student' is not proposed as a new institutional category, nor is the *work of staying* intended as a predictive model. Their value is conceptual: together, they disrupt the apparent simplicity of the distinction between staying and leaving and bring into view processes that eventual retention can conceal. The challenge, then, is to move from a predominant concern with retaining students towards a deeper understanding of enabling continuation, one that recognises students as active participants while retaining institutional responsibility for the conditions within which that participation occurs. The question is therefore no longer simply *why students stay*, but *what work staying requires, why that work may be greater for some students than for others, and how higher education might create conditions in which less saving is necessary*.

ORCID iD


Sarah Yearsley https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9342-6524

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Author Biography

Sarah Yearsley is a Senior Lecturer in Education, Childhood and Communities at Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom. She holds a PhD in Education and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research interests include student retention and continuation in higher education, student belonging, student agency, and inclusive approaches to student support and personal tutoring.