

Inter-Universities Retention Network

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1. Retention in Irish Universities

The universities identified retention, completion and student withdrawal as important issues to be addressed and they have received increasing attention within the Irish university sector, particularly over the last 3 years. Tackling preventable underperformance among university students has been the focus of a wide range of interventions across the sector. These have been supported by targeted initiatives funding from the Higher Education Authority, increased intra-institutional awareness, and the establishment of the Irish Inter-University Retention Network.

2. Irish Retention in Context

Overall figures on student completion of university courses in Ireland suggest that an average of 83.2% of students complete the university courses on which they originally enrol. A recent HEA study on completion (Morgan, Kellaghan & Flanagan, 2000) indicates that student completion rates are higher in Ireland than in other European countries. However, as is the case elsewhere, certain areas of study and certain student groups are characterised by higher non-completion rates than is reflected by the average figure. The following have all been found to decrease the likelihood of course completion among university students: Under-preparedness in mathematics, lack of adequate interaction with secondary school career guidance services, socio economic background, motivation to avail of student support, mismatched expectations and poor adjustment to the challenges of third level learning environments.

3. The Inter-University Retention Network

The Retention Network consists of representatives from each of the Irish universities. It was set up by CHIU to exchange ideas and information that relate to the issue of retention among university students and to promote best practice on tackling non-completion. The Network has developed a common 'exit-interview' schedule for withdrawing students to enable the collection comparison and analysis of standardised, qualitative information across the sector.

4. Important Principles Relating to Student Retention in Third Level Settings

The Retention Network's approach is informed by a number of important principles consistent with recent international literature that has cautioned against viewing student retention in simplistic ways or assuming that it can be used as an indicator of educational quality (e.g. Cooper, 2002, McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000). They include the following:

- Student non-completion is not a universally negative phenomenon. Much of the Irish data on student 'drop-out' indicate in fact that most withdrawing students return to the same university or enroll on another third level course within a year of their initial departure.
- It is inappropriate to specify an 'ideal' retention rate for any third level course because the competencies and orientations of student groups will differ according to changing entry requirements and learner characteristics.
- Institutional commitment, the establishment of supportive student relationships, student involvement and learner support within university settings are extremely important factors (Tinto 2002). It is important for universities to address those issues that lie inside their remit while recognising that retention is a complex multi dimensional issue (Yorke, 1999).
- The provision of an effective third level learning environment involves facilitating autonomy and self-direction (e.g Tinto, Goodsell-Love & Russo, 1993). Freedom of choice is a crucial part of this type of environment. Universities should be defined by their respect for freedom and independence within a system that needs to balance the rigours of academic demand and the safeguards of student support.

5. A Diversity of Strategies and Initiatives Supporting Retention

Irish universities have been working explicitly and in focused ways to arrive at an understanding of issues relating to student retention, and have been introducing interventions that attempt to provide more support for students. Examples include:

- Reviews of literature on student retention (e.g. Baird, 2002)
- The introduction of retention related roles within universities;
- Studies on transition from second to third level (e.g Morley et al, 2002)
- The introduction of centralised formative teaching evaluations (e.g. Moore & Kuol, 2003)
- Active investigation into learner processes such as cognitive styles and adjustment (e.g. Moore, O'Maidin & McElligott, 2002)
- The installation and enhancement of student support initiatives;
- The diagnosis of 'at risk' students (e.g. O'Donoghue, 1998)
- The establishment of centres to address specific learning challenges (e.g. maths learning centres, computing, languages etc.)
- Gathering data from successful alumni to explore dynamics and experiences that gave rise to effective course completion
- The initiation, maintenance and enhancement of peer supported learning systems (e.g Mahdi, 2004)
- The provision of information and support for study skills, life skills and career development
- The provision of professional development supports for teachers
- The carrying out of focused studies on students who withdraw from their chosen courses

6. Requirements for Further Progress on Retention

In order to make further progress on retention, it is important for third level institutions to develop the following:

- An increasingly strong cross-sectoral understanding of the nature of the formal and informal student support strategies that have been initiated in university settings.
- A clear distinction between voluntary, satisfactory course withdrawal and unnecessary, preventable underperformance and withdrawal along with strategies to address the latter.
- An understanding of the features of third level experience that give rise to student success (i.e. a focus on the experiences of successful graduates) as well as those that have been found to be associated with student 'failure'.
- A contextually sensitive analysis of retention which takes account of the differences between universities, the courses they offer and the differing profiles of student groups.
- An understanding of the types of support and advice offered by schools to students in making their choice of courses.
- A comprehensive approach to examining pre-entry factors such as preparedness, realistic knowledge of course content, requirements, career paths and how the universities may impact on or interface with this preparation.
- A more robust understanding of the socio-economic factors associated with non-completion, and more respectful ways of identifying students' familiarity with third level learning environments.
- Enhanced teacher-focused initiatives including professional development, pedagogical innovation and the assessment, evaluation and rewarding of excellent teaching related activity.
- Learner- focused research designed to develop a more robust understanding of important features of third level learning including cognitive and affective dynamics.

7. Recommendations

The Retention Network proposes that universities should

- Commit to the continuous initiation, maintenance and monitoring of effective interventions designed to enhance student experience and performance at third level.
- Broaden the concept of retention to include all issues that have an effect on students' ability to meet their academic challenges more successfully or in pursuit of their educational mission, continue to respect the freedom of the individual to choose how he/she functions within a system of academic demand and personal support.
- Recognise that non-completion rates cannot and should not be completely eliminated but rather monitored and understood with a view to providing support to students who can benefit from such support and with a general focus on enhancing student performance.
- Continue to collaborate to provide a collective focus on effective student supports.
- Develop and facilitate more fine-grained approaches to student support and research to help address the related issues of student underperformance, student persistence, retention and academic success.

8. Proposed Immediate Actions:

The following actionable steps should be taken in order to address some of the recurring issues that have been identified within the university sector

Second level career guidance enhancement: Career guidance to school leavers at second level, needs to be universally available, reviewed and reinforced with a view to improving the students' course choice process that occurs before entering the university system.

Flexible early course transfer arrangements for first year students: There should be non punitive, penalty free arrangements in place for students who want to change courses during their early time in college (entry requirements permitting), or leave later following a decision on the unsuitability of their original choice.

More dedicated, integrated learner support systems within the university setting: Dedicated resources need to be allocated to learner support systems in order to bolster, enhance, develop, reinforce and enhance the stability of proven initiatives at local and sectoral levels.

Active support for research and knowledge creation in the area of third level learning: Research and development aimed at enhancing and creating knowledge about student learning, adjustment, adaptability and positive participation should be supported and developed.

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