



WHY STUDENTS LEAVE: FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTO STUDENT NON-COMPLETION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Focused Research Report No. 4 **2015**

Scholarship in Teaching
and Learning funded by
the National Forum:

*Strengthening Ireland's
evidence base for
teaching and learning
enhancement in higher
education*



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

PREFACE TO NATIONAL FORUM FOCUSED RESEARCH PROJECTS

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education is a key consultative forum and an evidence-based change agent for teaching and learning enhancement and innovation for impact. It works in partnership with students, teachers, experts, learner support providers and researchers - and with institutional and system level leadership throughout the sector to provide thought leadership on developing future-orientated aspects of teaching and learning on Ireland's emerging higher education landscape.

As part of Forum's commitment to leading and facilitating enhancement from an evidence-based standpoint, it has funded a series of Focused Research Projects to be conducted over a six month period by higher education researchers in partnership with the Forum. These projects were designed to facilitate rapid and focused research on specified themes to inform academic practice and guide enhancement activities, including:

- Transitions to higher education
- Student completion and retention in higher education(qualitative studies)
- Open Education Resources and Open Access
- Recognition of Prior Learning
- Research on Higher Education Teaching & Learning in Ireland

Successful projects were awarded funding by the Forum following competitive selection, based on international peer review and were initiated in December 2014. They ranged in scope from national analysis of existing practices and policies to in-depth case-studies located in small clusters of institutions. Ethics approval for the projects was granted through the higher education institutions involved and the National Forum's Research Ethics Committee.

Collectively the projects have now created a baseline understanding in a national context on these topics, as well as a springboard for future enhancement activities and further practice/policy developments. Importantly, the successful completion of these projects attests to the collaborative partnership and engagement between the Forum and higher education institutions in developing a shared common purpose for evidence-based enhancement activities. In addition they also demonstrate the potential for contributing to the research and scholarship of Irish teaching and learning locally and internationally through peer-reviewed publications. The Forum in line with its scholarship strategy will support project teams to achieve this objective.

Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research into Student Non-Completion

This project, a national analysis, undertook a systematic survey of existing qualitative data on student non-completion gathered by Irish higher education institutions. It drew on reports and data from 16 higher education institutions including Universities, Institutes of Technology and HECA Colleges. In doing so, the study provides a snapshot of current issues underpinning students' decisions to discontinue their higher education studies. Although retention has gained increasing policy and research attention over the last number of years, the majority of the completed studies have been more strongly oriented towards quantitative (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008) rather than qualitative analysis (Remond et al, 2011). This research helps to inform the forthcoming HEA Report

2015 A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education Institutions 2012/13 2013/14, a quantitative analysis of student non-completion across the sector.

The findings of the current qualitative study identified five core themes which are significant in terms of student non-completion including: course, personal, financial, medical/health and family. Of these five course was the strongest factor influencing student non-completion. Importantly the study also calls for a more holistic and positive interpretation of non-completion as part of the wider context of students' career and programme plans, involving greater learner mobility across the higher education sector. While this work draws on current qualitative data-sets from institutions, it emphasises the importance of moving towards gathering systematic and standardised qualitative information for all students leaving higher education. Such a move would allow relevant data to be utilised effectively in generating more comprehensive understandings of student non-completion and the most appropriate institutional and policy responses required.

Thanks are due for the commitment and energy invested by the Project Team of Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry, Professor Suzanne Quinn and Dr Elaine Burroughs. The National Forum looks forward greatly to its ongoing partnership with the Project Team in sharing the outcomes of this projects for the benefit of the wider higher education sector during the next academic cycle and beyond.

Finally, this project is part of a cluster examining qualitative aspects of student non-completion which include: Student Retention in ICT Programmes and Reaching Out: Student Drop-Out a student-led project by the Union of Students in Ireland.

For further information on all of the National Forum Focused Research Projects please see: <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/t-l-scholarship/national-forum-research-projects/>.

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Executive Summary

Student withdrawal is an important topic for the student, the higher education sector, and broader Irish society for a range of social, emotional and financial reasons. Research on why students withdraw from higher education in Ireland is quite recent and is primarily quantitative in nature. Building on the work of Redmond (2011), this research - funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning - undertakes an in-depth qualitative analysis on reasons for withdrawal across the Irish higher education sector to inform current and future approaches to student retention. The qualitative data gathered is used to explore commonalities and differences across and between higher education institutions, and aims to offer a fuller understanding of why students withdraw from higher education in Ireland. The findings point to the need for a fresh approach to the issue of student withdrawal and the importance of a more systematic approach across the sector.

Within the academic literature, the issue of student retention has moved from a focus on student commitment (Tinto, 1975) as a key driver to a more nuanced understanding of the multiplicity of factors that underpin student non-completion (Green and Baird, 2009). International research suggests that while attrition occurs across the student body, it is highest in the first year (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Mannan, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008). Withdrawal can be due to a number of reasons, such as emotional demands, particularly for younger students (Carolan and Kruger, 2011; Kevern et al., 1999); social integration and interaction with faculty and staff (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008); and commuting, loneliness and difficulties in coping away from home (Bozick 2007). In the Irish context, there is evidence of a growing body of research on withdrawal in the Irish Institute of Technology sector (Costello, 2003; Crowley et al., 2012; Eivers et al., 2002; Healy, 1999) and in Irish universities (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Morgan et al., 2000), however, to date there has been little *qualitative* research undertaken, with the exception of Redmond et al. (2011). Therefore, in-depth research that aims to

understand the drivers of withdrawal and the behaviour of students who are considering non-completion is warranted in both the Irish and international contexts.

Methodology

The goal of this research was to draw together pre-existing qualitative data across the Irish HE sector. Thirty eight institutions affiliated to the National Forum, comprising Universities, Institutes of Technology, Colleges of Education and HECA Colleges were invited to participate. Of the thirty eight institutions, sixteen agreed to participate: 31% Universities (n=5), 44% Institutes of Technology (n=7) and 25% HECA Colleges (n=4). The data gathered from the sixteen institutions included survey reports, internal reports, and qualitative student exit interview data for the years between 2011 and 2014. Just over 4,000 (n=4,036) responses were gathered and analysed through a two-step process: (1) a content frequency analysis to identify a number of key themes/reasons for withdrawal; (2) an interpretivist qualitative analysis. In order to identify possible differences across the higher education sector, the data was also disaggregated by institutional type for analysis.

Results

The content frequency analysis identified five core themes: Course, Personal, Financial, Health/Medical, and Family influencing student non-completion.

1. Within the theme “Course”, a number of sub-themes were evident: (1) wrong course choice; (2) transferring to another course, which also included reapplying through the CAO for another course; (3) issues relating to course interest and expectation; (4) course difficulty; (5) mistakes with the CAO, or the student did not get their preferred CAO choice. For some students, course choice was interrelated with a number of other reasons for withdrawal.

2. Personal issues relating to personal motivation, issues of self-efficacy, family circumstances and student preparedness for higher education were also highly significant.
3. Finance was a concern for many students particularly in terms of living expenses, accommodation, and travel costs. These were especially difficult for students moving from rural to urban areas and included those who commuted long distances daily. Fees were also an important factor in the decision to discontinue a course. Students experienced financial difficulties due to a combination of both fees and living expenses, particularly if they did not qualify for the local authority grant scheme. Lastly, financial difficulties were experienced due to unforeseen family circumstances.
4. The fourth reason for non-completion related to health and medical issues, predominantly emotional and mental health. Students explicitly referred to mental health issues, which included anxiety, tiredness, and a generalised sense of disconnection. Isolation due to large class sizes, lack of friendships, loneliness and feeling homesick were acute for those who moved from rural to urban areas or to an institution too far from home to commute. Medical issues were also identified as a reason for withdrawal, as a result of pre-existing conditions or those that arose in the course of studies and a number of students state that withdrawal is linked to caring duties for a family member(s) suffering from health issues.
5. The final broad theme relating to student withdrawal was family issues. This included major family incidents or difficult family circumstances where students needed time to deal with changing circumstances including additional caring duties or the need to financially support the family. Students experiencing loneliness stated that they wished to be nearer to their home and family, referring to long commute times between home and the higher education institution.

In the comparative analysis across the higher education institutions, key distinctions became evident. The broad theme of “course” was a key driver of

withdrawal in both the University and IT sectors while, the main reason for withdrawal from the HECA sector was financial.

Recommendations

This project offers a number of specific recommendations for key stakeholders namely higher education institutions, policymakers and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. A more systematic approach to student withdrawal should be collaboratively developed by all higher education institutions (in particular, through developing a common exit form) but also a greater willingness of Irish higher education institutions to cooperate with research being undertaken on the topic should be encouraged. This project also makes a number of recommendations that relate particularly to the links between course choice, course marketing, and entry requirements.

Secondly, we highlight the need within higher education policy to adopt a broader perspective on student non-completion recognising that student non-completion can actually be part of a student's broader career plan as well as being a potentially negative phenomenon. We make a number of practical recommendations that suggest a more integrated approach to higher education provision needs to be developed, including recognition of the links between student non-completion and other public policies including the operation of the student grants system and transportation planning. This research also recommends a number of initiatives to better help students to transition from second level to higher education.

Thirdly, building on the findings of this project, we highlight gaps in the knowledge base that could form part of a research agenda for the National Forum including an audit of existing student support services within the Irish higher education sector to inform the development of national standards on student support services. Further qualitative studies to understand the process of student course selection and to examine the "pull" factors that keep students in institutions, when they have considered withdrawing, would

be key to the evidence based inputs needed to further address attrition and retention.

Foreword

Student withdrawal is an important topic because of the costs arising from its occurrence: for the student in terms of time, expense and emotional energy; the institution in terms of loss of resources and concern for student welfare; and society in terms of opportunity costs and the imperative of ensuring a highly educated workforce for sustainable economic development. Research on why students withdraw in Ireland is quite recent and much of what has been undertaken has been quantitative in approach. In 2011, one of the lead researchers on this project (Suzanne Quin) undertook a large-scale study of student withdrawal in UCD using a qualitative methodology. The goal was to inform current and future approaches to student retention within the institution.

This research, funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, builds on the knowledge gained from that study, widening and developing its brief to encompass all higher education institutions affiliated to the National Forum in Ireland. It brings together existing qualitative data from HEI's that have been engaged in tracking and evaluating the reasons for student non-completion and non-progression. This data is used to explore commonalities and differences across and between sectors, and to gain a fuller understanding of why students withdraw from higher education as a whole. The findings point to the need for a fresh approach to the issue of student withdrawal and to the importance of gathering systematic information across the sector. The conclusions draw out the policy implications of the findings and point to areas that require further research.

The next section outlines the literature that addresses student non-completion in the international and Irish contexts. This is followed by a comprehensive outline of the methodological approach employed in this research. The core of this report focuses on the research findings along with key recommendations.

1. Literature review

1.1 Introduction

Student non-completion of higher education is a growing trend internationally with serious consequences for the individual, institution and policymakers. Since the 1970s, a significant body of work has emerged on the issue of undergraduate student retention (Chen and DesJardins, 2008; Georg, 2009; Glogowska et al., 2007; Rootman, 1972; Spady, 1971) and the emphasis has moved from identifying student commitment as the most important factor in student retention (Tinto, 1975) to a more nuanced understanding of the multiplicity of factors that underpin student non-completion (Green and Baird, 2009).

International research suggests that in the University sector, attrition is highest in the first year (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Mannan, 2007; Yorke and Longden, 2008), unsurprising given the major personal and academic transition involved in the move from secondary to tertiary education. In some programmes, particularly professional health sciences, emotional demands are considered to be a key factor for younger students (Carolan and Kruger, 2011). The influence of age is often cited as an important variable, with Kevern et al. (1999) stating that, in the UK, younger students were less likely to continue and withdrew earlier in their programme. Bozick (2007) has drawn attention to social factors, such as commuting, loneliness and difficulties in coping away from home. These issues are often key drivers for young higher education students to withdraw. However, the decision of older students is often shaped by factors external to the University environment such as financial problems, the demands of part-time study, or the provision of care for dependents. The importance of taking a fine-grained and open-minded approach to the issue of student non-completion is advocated by O'Keefe et al. (2011), who suggest that often student withdrawal can be part of a bigger career plan. In this project, focusing on student non-completion across the Irish HE sector, we adopt a perspective that seeks to unravel the multiplicity of factors driving the student decision to withdraw.

While Ireland has a relatively high retention rate (78%) compared with many other countries, such as the USA (54%) and Australia (67%) (Van Stolk et al. 2007), over the past ten years there has been increasing policy emphasis on mapping and understanding patterns of student non-completion. Empirical work has revealed significant differences in retention depending on a) the level of the programme (certificate, diploma, degree); b) the type of institution, ranging from 22% in the institutions of technology to 4% in teacher training colleges and c) prior educational attainment as measured by Leaving Certificate points (HEA, 2010). The same study revealed that students further into their programme are less likely to withdraw so retention efforts are particularly important in first year.

For many institutions, there is a financial impetus to reducing withdrawal. While there is evidence of a growing body of research related to retention and non-completion in the Irish Institute of Technology sector (Costello, 2003; Crowley et al., 2012; Eivers et al., 2002; Healy, 1999; Morgan et al., 2000) and in Irish universities (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008), to date there has been little qualitative research undertaken, with the exception of Redmond et al. (2011), to understand the drivers of withdrawal and the behaviour of students who are considering non-completion. Drawing on the international literature, we discuss the perceived influences on student non-completion. We do not merely focus on dominant negative discourses of withdrawal, but also on the potential opportunity that non-completion provides for some students who take less linear educational paths.

1.2 Academic Integration

International research on student non-completion draws attention to a number of key academic issues shaping patterns of retention and progression, including initial enrolment to a wrong programme (Harrison, 2006), unrealistic expectations of University life (Kuh et al., 2011), and difficulty in managing the transition to higher education (Morton et al., 2014). Each of these issues is explored in some detail below.

1.2.1 Degree Programme and Course Choice

“Wrong” or poor choice of course is often cited as a major reason for withdrawal of students, particularly in the first year (Andrew et al., 2008; Christie et al., 2004; Georg, 2009; Harrison, 2006; Mashaba and Mhlongo, 1995; Quinn et al., 2005; Yorke, 1999). Through a lack of research/understanding on the student’s part and/or insufficient information from either career guidance counsellors or the higher education institution, students often fail to understand the scope of their potential course and what the course entails (Martinez, 1995). The lack of understanding (among some students) of the demands of the course is often shaped by the opinions and experiences of their social network (James et al., 1999), rather than any specific evidence to underpin rational decision-making. This particular factor appears to be less of an issue for students in vocational or professional programmes that have a clearly articulated identity. Indeed, the research shows that there are higher rates of withdrawal across more general entry programmes, such as Arts/Humanities (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008), Science and Technology (Quinn et al. 2005; Department of Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, Wales, 2009) and language and cultural disciplines (Georg, 2009). This may, in part, be related to what Weng, Cheong and Cheong (2010) identify as “goal commitment”. They suggest that in more vocational/professional programmes students have much more clearly articulated career pathways and this is very important in the creation of their own academic identities, both personally and within the institution. More recently in a study of health science students, Wray et al. (2014, p 1712) remarked that among the students who had considered withdrawing but have subsequently chosen to stay in education, “a strong desire to become a nurse features significantly”.

In order to develop academic identity, Carolan and Kruger (2011, p. 142) suggest that prior to both course enrolment and attending classes, students need access to clearer, better information including “details of course expectations, time and lecture commitments, and course intensity”. While additional information might reassure students around their own decision-

making, Gibney et al. (2011, p. 360) suggest that extrinsic motivations for entering higher education – particularly due to parental or societal pressure – may be a significant contributing factor in students uncertainty about course choice, summed up by one of their respondents as a fear of “*having made the wrong choice of course and being stuck in it*”. A recent study by the UK Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (McCulloch, 2014) suggests that some of the most effective interventions could be made even before students apply to University such that incoming students are more confident they are making well-informed and considered choices about future career paths.

While there is much discussion in policy documents and institutional strategies about the negative consequences of student non-completion, Christie et al. (2004) consider student non-completion to be more complex. Their research highlights that although a poor fit between the individual student and the institution is a problem for many students who ultimately leave, the majority of students do not withdraw on impulse, but rather report a clear intention to continue third-level studies albeit in a different institution. More recently, O’Keefe et al. (2011) have even suggested that for some students withdrawal is a conscious part of their career plan to transfer/gain access to some area of study that is a better career and interest fit for them. While poor University and/or subject fit has been reported in studies by Georg (2009) and Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) as a reason for withdrawal, this has generally been couched in terms of reduced student motivation, disengagement from the learning environment, and less time spent in classes. Although this is true for a particular group of students, it should not be the sole lens through which withdrawal is viewed.

1.2.2 Transition into Higher Education

Undoubtedly, the shift from second to higher education poses multiple challenges for students (Hussey and Smith, 2010) and this can range from adjusting to an environment of non-compulsory attendance and large lectures, to the need for increased levels of self-discipline (Cameron et al., 2010;

Department of Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009; Georg, 2009; Tinto, 2010; Quinn et al., 2005). International research on student transitions in higher education highlights the importance of this key period in a student's academic life, as those who have difficulties with the transition may perform poorly and/or disengage at an early stage (Gibney et al., 2011) with consequences for future career and learning opportunities.

With some assistance and support from their educational institution, family and other networks, most students are able to make this transition, but others struggle and may not have the confidence to seek help when required. Lowe and Cook (2003) argue that academic staff often fail to recognise the challenges first year students face with encountering, for example, the formal lecture, acquiring the necessary study skills, time and financial management, IT skills, and project work. Academic isolation can be experienced by students as a result of the distance between students and academic staff, and what Read et al. (2003) describe as an unfamiliarity with the academic environment. In fact, more recent literature has identified the teacher-student relationship as a key variable in helping students manage the transition. For example, research by Weng, Cheong and Gheong (2010) found that positive interaction with faculty can help students in terms of improved academic performance and commitment to their own initial goals even when the transition is difficult.

Hussey and Smith (2010) identify the importance of de-homogenising the shift from secondary to higher education by identifying a range of transitions, i.e. knowledge; understanding and skills; autonomy; approaches to learning; social and cultural integration; and the student's self-confidence. They argue that an understanding of these transitions must form the basis of the design and delivery of higher education. This has been the focus of much recent work on the first year student experience (James et al., 2010; Leese, 2010), that has highlighted an apparent gap between the expectations of, and reality for, students at University and the need to better comprehend the nature of undergraduate study (Nicholson et al., 2013). Of course, this is linked to pre-admission information and preparedness discussed in the earlier section and

illustrates the need to develop broad-ranging supports on a variety of scales and time periods to enhance student retention and progression. The McCulloch (2014) report argues that "our results support the conclusion that efforts to increase student retention need to intervene early in respondents' transition to HE probably before students even apply to University" (McCulloch, 2014, p. 63).

While specific administrative, academic and procedural transitions must be managed by higher education institutions and students, particularly at the point of entry, recent work has highlighted the role of emotion in determining whether the transition can be successfully made (McMillan, 2013). This work highlights the need for the development of student supports, including peer mentoring, which actively recognise the power/influence of emotional responses to change. Students that adjust to University more effectively are those that demonstrate high emotional management and high levels of emotional self-efficacy (Nightingale et al., 2013). This has significant implications for the type of interventions that might be required or most effectively deployed, and also points to the importance of student preparedness – *both academic and emotional* – prior to entering higher education.

1.3 Social Integration / Engagement

Most students who withdraw early in their higher education career tend to do so for reasons related to programme choice, difficulty in making the transition from secondary to higher education or poor prior academic performance at second level. In research undertaken in Ireland, a clear relationship was identified between Leaving Certificate grades and course completion in higher education (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Morgan et al., 2000). Students entering with lower entry points and weaker results in Mathematics and English tended to be more likely to withdraw.

However, beyond this issue of academic integration, Cameron et al. (2010) suggest that students who withdraw later in their programme do so because

of personal reasons outside of the remit of the University. Higher education institutions can not necessarily do anything to prevent these issues occurring, but student continuation could perhaps be better facilitated through the provision of more flexible learning paths. Health and medical issues, caring demands and family difficulties are all personal issues that many students face that can result in less than optimal performance and, in extreme circumstances eventual withdrawal. At the same time, there are also more structural societal issues that can play into a student's ability to feel that they fully belong in the higher education setting. A variety of issues can affect a student's sense of place within the institution, potentially reducing their security, confidence, and engagement (Yorke and Thomas, 2003). This might range from their socio-economic background through to practical issues around living arrangements that impact on their ability to socially integrate with their peers and academic structures.

1.3.1 Geo-demographic factors

In recent years, increased emphasis has been placed on the importance of diversifying entry to higher education by supporting students from potentially disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and locations, and non-traditional students such as mature entrants. This shift in approach raises the need for different types of support and understanding, as Australian and UK studies have illustrated that mature students are more likely to have family/work commitments and thus more likely to enrol part-time, which is itself a risk factor for attrition (Krause et al., 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2008).

From a socio-economic perspective, Hussey and Smith (2010) argue that the background of a student can affect their preparedness for University, their commitment to University, and their career aspirations. Students from lower socio-economic groups may be the first member of their family or community to enter higher education and thus must navigate the academic and personal transitions without the support of others who have managed the transition previously. For first-generation students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, a substantial proportion cite their reluctance to approach faculty staff (Quinn et al., 2005), even though there is widespread acknowledgement

that failing to gain academic support is a significant influence on withdrawal (Colalillo, 2007). There is clearly an issue of social and cultural capital that becomes critical in terms of managing the academic and personal transitions associated with entry to higher education. Christie et al. (2004) state that as students are often heavily influenced by peers and families, students from more disadvantaged backgrounds have less access to these networks of familiarity with higher education and its workings than students whose parents, siblings or wider social network may have attended. They observe “higher rates of withdrawal amongst students from lower social class backgrounds, and in less prestigious institutions, [that] exacerbate the already steep class gradient evident in the profile of students who access higher education in the first instance” (Christie et al., 2004, p. 619).

Non-completion rates for students from lower-ranked social classes have tended to be higher (Quinn et al., 2005). Related to this, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to cite financial reasons for withdrawal, whereas those from professional backgrounds cite class size, stress and workload as reasons for withdrawal (Yorke and Longden, 2008). This is of particular interest to this study given the variations identified in our data cohort between students in different types of higher education institutions. Research undertaken by the HEFCE (2000) in the UK noted that non-completion rates are higher in the post-1992 universities that have proportionately more students from disadvantaged backgrounds and there may be possible parallels here with the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland.

Beyond the potential lack of familiarity with the higher education environment, its workings and demands, more practical issues may bear unequally on students from low income families. The increased living costs associated with a move to higher education will disproportionately hit lower income families, perhaps constraining students’ choices about living arrangements and commuting. Lower-income students sometimes choose to economize by living at home, commuting to college, and working during term time, thus limiting their attendance on campus and their potential avenues for the type of

broader engagement that might generate institutional commitment. As shown above, significant research does support the contention that students from particular geo-demographic backgrounds may, because of their comparative lack of social capital and constrained financial circumstances, be more at risk of non-completion. However, there is some debate about whether in a widening participation scenario, the core driver is actually the personal attributes of the student, who may be less prepared, or the traditional culture of the institutions, discussed in section 1.4 below.

1.3.2 Social comfort and involvement

For many students, a key challenge of the transition to higher education is to manage their own changing identities and develop a sense of belonging to, and within, the institution. This issue is critical as Palmer et al. (2009) have clearly illustrated that the likelihood of remaining at University was higher for students who developed a sense of belonging to the University, as their study satisfaction was increased through connectedness. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) argue that the development of a feeling of belonging is of particular importance in the first year of study, as most decisions to drop out are made during this year. While living at home can often be seen as positive, in that it provides affordable shelter and security, it can also limit time on campus and the ability to participate socially. As illustrated in section 1.3.3 above, very often this can be stratified by socio-demographic background.

Bozick (2007) and Quinn et al. (2005) found that students that commute and hold employment while in education are more likely to withdraw as they have less time to engage academically and socially within the University. Conversely, students living in on-campus accommodation were less likely to withdraw (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008) regardless of their work status, a finding that may relate to the building of stronger relationships with faculty and peers (Bozick, 2007) and the development of a sense of belonging to the institution. For those forced to commute, the effect of the physical distance was more pronounced among students who did not already have friends at the University, and whose friends and family had less experience with higher education (Bozick, 2007). Some students living away from home had

difficulties coping with unfamiliar environments and forming new friendship networks (Department of Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, Wales, 2009; Quinn et al. 2010). Yorke (1999) and Yorke and Longden (2008) found that social isolation can be an important factor in the decision to withdraw, especially in the first semester for first year students. There is evidence to suggest that student satisfaction, contact with friends, and with academic staff results in greater commitment to the University, reducing students' sense of isolation (Eivers et al., 2002; Astin, 1985), enhancing a sense of belonging and thus a commitment to being part of a bigger enterprise. There is certainly a role for designing curricula that attempt to develop these "softer" learning outcomes and use the potential of group activities and group cohesion in contributing to social integration and student retention (Martinez and Munday, 1998). This can be done, for example, by creating social spaces of learning and commitment to a group (Moore and Gilmartin, 2010).

1.4 Institutional "habitus"

Across the literature on non-completion, one of the constant patterns with student interviewees is their broad commitment to education. For them, it is not necessarily the idea of higher education that results in withdrawal, but their fit within it. Some of this may be related to issues around programme choice and their own personal attributes, perhaps linked to difficulties with social integration, but there is also some evidence to suggest that the institutional "habitus" – values and practices – may be an important factor in the student non-completion story (Thomas, 2002). Tinto (1975) in his student integration model of non-completion suggested that student attrition may be influenced by the ethos, culture and traditions of the higher education institution, leading students to feel a form of cultural dislocation. For institutions to seriously tackle non-retention they "need to recognize that the roots of attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings, now assumed to be natural to higher education, in which they ask students to learn" (Leone and Tian, 2009, p. 130).

A recent report by the HEA (2011) in the UK suggested that while strides have been made by institutions to promote an institutional habitus that is more open and welcoming to a diversity of students, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of particular initiatives and the way that students experience or benefit from such changes. Institutions need to attend to not just the number and range of interventions or services they provide, but the quality and extent of the students' interactions with them as well as the institution more broadly. Maher and Mcallister (2013, p. 63) state that "students need to feel valued and part of a supportive learning community, which extends beyond the lecture theatre". Indeed, Noble and Henderson (2011, p.79) highlight that "students' high quality interactions with peers and academic staff in an informal context are vital to academic success". Given the strong link between attrition and students first year performance (Harvey and Luckman, 2014), the development of a supportive, open and engaging institutional context both in terms of the values/mission and, perhaps more importantly for students, the everyday practices, is critical to addressing issues around student non-completion.

Many institutions have formalised student support services designed to play a mediating role in preventing students from withdrawing. However, this can be undermined by (1) a lack of proper resourcing; and (2) student disengagement with the University (Sutherland et al., 2007). The importance of understanding if, and how, students interact with these services (UK HEA, 2011) is highlighted by the fact that many students who withdrew did not notify anyone that they were withdrawing or considering leaving their degree programme (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Last and Fullbrook, 2003).

One of the critical actions institutions might take is to identify what are the "pull" factors that retain a student that might have previously considered leaving. Why do some students choose to stay (Wray et al., 2014) and others withdraw even though they may have similar backgrounds and difficulties with transition? Christie et al. (2004, p. 621) have identified a serious lacuna in knowledge that might "help us to explain the point at which a particular set of

pressures – financial, social or institutional – remain bearable for one student but not for another.” There is some evidence from a psycho-social perspective that students with high self-efficacy can always find strategies to complete the goals/degree, and respond more positively to negative outcomes than people with low self-efficacy (Seijts, et al., 2004). House (2013) suggests that what institutions may need to consider are the ways in which they can build resilience within students to deal with interpersonal, intrapersonal and demographic factors that may affect their educational experiences. While this is undoubtedly important in terms of reducing incidences of student withdrawal in the light of difficulties, this is also a key graduate attribute for any student entering into the complex living and work environments within which we now exist. Levels of self-efficacy are linked to the intention to persist, even in the face of many of the challenges referred to above, suggesting that institutions need to pay attention to creating a culture and practices that promote engagement, positive performance feedback and vicarious learning opportunities (Weng, Cheong and Cheong, 2010). These efforts would build resilience and an intention to persist within the student body.

1.5 Conclusion

Although the literature outlines specific core reasons for student non-completion, as discussed in detail above under the headings of academic integration, social integration and institutional “habitus”, there is rarely a single reason for a student deciding to withdraw, nor does the decision take place at one moment in time. Quinn et al. (2005) describe withdrawal as the process of a student drifting away from their studies based on a “bundle of influences”. Georg (2009) found that students who are less certain in their ability to study tend to have poorer class attendance, a greater likelihood to have paid work (but not financial troubles), are more likely to feel anonymous and socially uncomfortable, and lack ambition. However Medway and Penney (1994) illustrate the rational approach that some students take, considering the costs and benefits of staying in their degree programme. While feelings of guilt and failure may be prevalent for some, for others, withdrawing is regarded more

positively (Martinez, 1995) and as the more recent literature suggests, can often be seen as part of a bigger career plan (O'Keefe et al., 2011).

Although some of the factors for attrition are within the power of the University to address, more personal factors, such as injury or illness, or domestic issues, may be beyond the scope of the University (Perry et al. 2008). It is also worth cautioning that attrition factors can vary by student cohort. For example Wilcoxson et al. (2011) suggest that first year attrition is often linked to choice and to personal factors such as transition, ability to integrate into social and academic systems and preparedness, whereas attrition in the later years of study can be more closely linked to institutional factors relating to the quality of interactions with academic and administrative staff, feedback processes, teaching quality, course advice and University policies and facilities. This therefore suggests that what is needed is a more nuanced conceptualization of student withdrawal as illustrated in Figure 1.1 below.

This model recognises the various scales of influence from the individual “readiness” of the student, to how they interact with their peers and teachers, to the actual values and practices of the institutions within which they find themselves studying. However, their educational experiences do not exist in a vacuum so they must negotiate “push” and “pull” factors from more attractive educational offerings elsewhere, to family influences, and their own personal goals, vision and identity that they may be better or less well able to cope with depending on their own levels of self-efficacy.

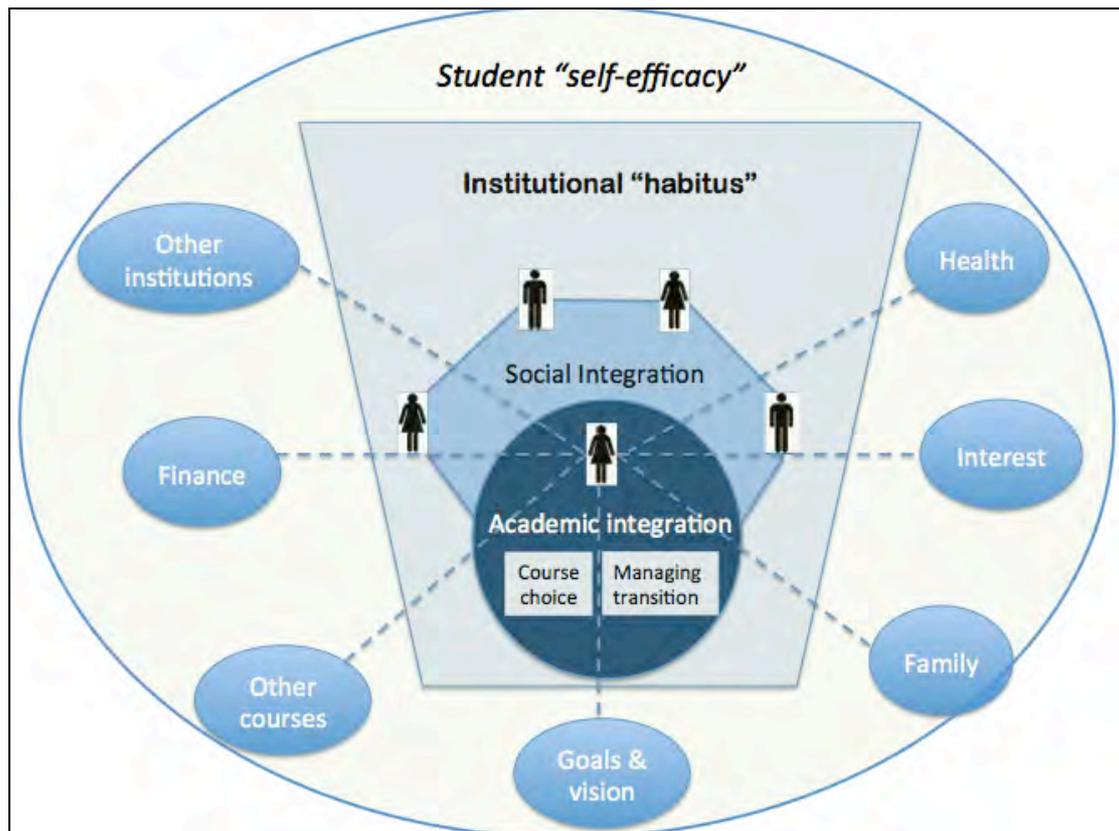


Figure 1.1 Conceptualising the environment of student non-completion

As we have illustrated, the responsibility for addressing student non-completion is multi-dimensional requiring more efficient and effective policies, better academic and emotional preparation and an institutional settings that places the student and their welfare at the heart of institutional policy and practice. This is imperative if society is to harness “the increased social capital when these students are successful” and prevent the loss of resources and “the enormous damage done to self-esteem when they are not” (Maher and McAllister, 2013, p 72).

2. Methodology

2.1 Overview

As discussed in the previous section, significant quantitative research exists in an Irish and international context on student non-completion (HEA, 2010) but there is less understanding of *how* and *why* students withdraw. This study adopts a qualitative approach to understand why students do not complete their higher education studies in Ireland. An interpretivist, qualitative approach is adopted to understand student behaviour and decision-making based on pre-existing primary and secondary sources of qualitative data collected from higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland. As required in the funding brief, no new data was collected as part of this study, but the data available was analysed using a content frequency analysis that generated key themes for further exploration. Ethical exemption was received from the UCD Human Research Ethics committee (*HS-E-15-20-Moore-Cherry*) given that the project utilised pre-existing, fully anonymised data.

2.2 Respondents and sampling

The purpose of this project was to bring together existing qualitative data from Irish HEIs that have been engaged in tracking and evaluating the reasons for student non-completion. Thirty eight institutions (n=38), including Universities, Institutes of Technology, Colleges of Education and HECA Colleges, affiliated to the National Forum fell within the scope of this study. In January 2015, the institutions were first contacted by email and letter addressed to the first National Forum designated contact within each institution (see Appendix 1). The communication explained the purpose of the project, invited them to participate, and requested the following information:

- A copy of any research carried out since 2000 within their institution on student withdrawal that included any qualitative material.
- Any qualitative data gathered from the academic year 2011/12 to 2013/14 (inclusive) on the reasons why students leave, the name of the

programme from which they withdrew, and the year of study on withdrawal.

- In the case of those who did not complete their first year, an indication of the specific point in the academic year that the student left their course.
- Institutions were also asked to distinguish between students who entered their programme directly from second level and non-standard entrants including mature, HEAR and DARE students.

The initial letter also offered a small grant of up to €500 per institution to support the anonymisation of data. The response to our request varied. In some cases, the designated contact person: (1) agreed to participate; (2) indicated that they would let us know in time; or (3) declined to participate. In other cases, this designated contact person did not respond at all (after multiple follow-up contacts by email and phone). Therefore, the second contact person was emailed the full letter detailing the project and re-initiating the participation request. If this course of action was not successful, the Registrar or equivalent of the institution was contacted. In many cases in order to facilitate our request, the designated contact person had to refer us to another more relevant person within the institution. In other cases, the designated person referred us to an incorrect contact, and that person, in turn, referred us to another contact for the requested information.

The management of this complex list of contacts for thirty eight institutions was demanding. Of the 38 institutions contacted, 53% agreed to participate (n=20), 29% declined (n=11) and 18% did not respond (n=7) (Figure 2.1 below). A final deadline for institutions to decide on participation was set to 27 February 2015. This appeared to focus attention on the project and responses became more frequent closer to the deadline.

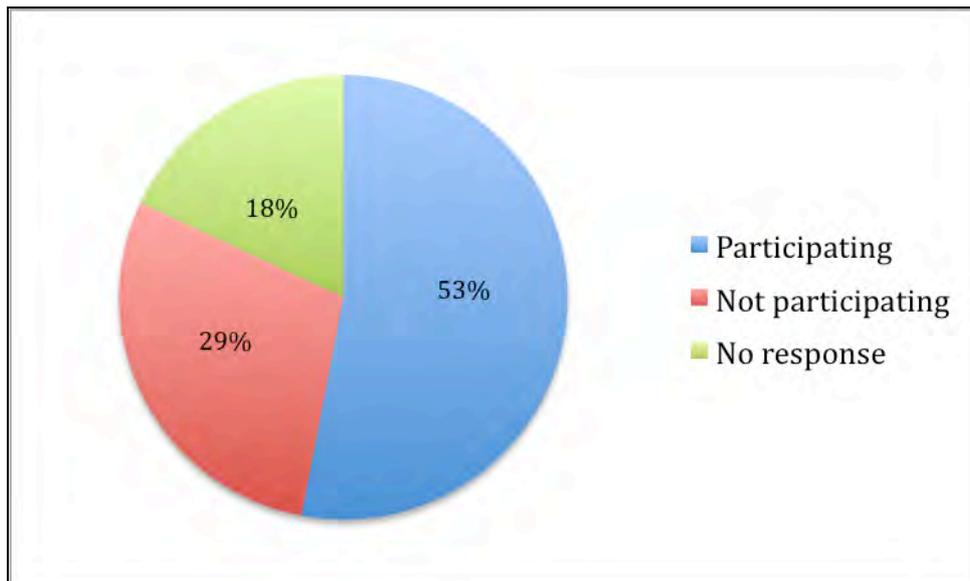


Figure 2.1 Initial response of institutions to participation request (n=38)

As the number of institutions who declined to participate in the research was quite high (n=18), this warranted investigation. A short survey was sent to these institutions, asking them a series of questions about the reasons that they chose not to participate in this project (see Appendix 2). The response rate of 50% (n=9) to this survey was adequate. Of those that responded, the main reasons offered for not taking part were: (a) lack of resources and time; (b) they don't gather this information; (c) they receive too many requests for information; and (d) lack of financial support for this work.

2.3 Data Collection

Two key types of information were identified as potentially important for this study: (1) internal reports; and (2) primary and secondary qualitative data.

2.3.1 Internal reports

All higher education institutions are required to monitor student non-completion and non-progression as part of their standard reporting to the Higher Education Authority. While these reports tend to be highly quantitative in nature, this project aimed to gather any qualitative data that may have been compiled by the institutions during this or other similar reporting processes. We therefore requested all of the institutions that agreed to participate to

submit internal reports containing any form of qualitative data whether published or unpublished. Redmond et al. (2011), based on research undertaken at UCD, is one of the few reports in the public domain about this topic, but other institutions also possessed potentially relevant data. The documents received were diverse in their format and included unpublished reports, executive summaries, and institutional briefing documents. Our research sought to bring together these internal reports as a relatively unexplored rich resource of information.

2.3.2 Primary and secondary qualitative data

Primary data comprises of information directly obtained from first-hand experience. For the purposes of this project, primary sources included forms submitted by students to their institution as part of the official withdrawal process that may have contained qualitative data in the form of responses to open-ended questions. In order to comply with ethical and data protection issues, these primary sources could only be made available to the research team following anonymisation within the home institution. In addition to this important source, representing a written account of the '*student voice*', we also requested any available secondary sources of information. This data may have been collected by a third party for their own recording purposes or as part of an institutional requirement, and potentially included records of support staff, such as student advisers, of their discussions with withdrawing students.

2.4 Data collection process

Not unexpectedly, difficulties were encountered in collecting the data even after institutions had agreed to participate. Following the initial letter that was sent to the institutions, only two of the twenty institutions that agreed to participate in the project submitted data. Therefore, a second letter was sent to participating institutions listing the data required and setting a deadline (beginning of April) for data submission (see Appendix 3). Only one institution submitted data in response to this letter. The remaining institutions were sent reminder emails and asked to respond with information on their progress in

gathering the data. If no response was gained from this method, a follow up call(s) was made to the contact person. In the majority of cases, the researcher maintained regular contact with the institutions through email and phone in order to ensure that the data was submitted (see Table 2.1 below). In total, sixteen institutions submitted data. Four institutions that had agreed to participate did not submit material. In some cases, those who had agreed to participate were later overruled by more senior management and they withdrew from the study. The findings and results in the next section are thus based on the responses from a total of sixteen institutions.

Table 2.1 Process of data collection

Data Submitted Following	No. institutions
Initial letter inviting participation	2
Second letter requesting data with a deadline	1
Two letters, email(s)	2
Two letters, email(s), and phone call(s)	11
Total	16
Agreed to participate, but did not submit data (following two letters and more than five elements of communication).	4

In order for our findings to have broad applicability across the HE sector in Ireland, we were keen to include data from a variety of institutional types: Universities, Institutes of Technology, Colleges of Education, and HECA Colleges. Of the sixteen institutions that participated, 31% were Universities (n=5), 44% were Institutes of Technology (n=7) and 25% were Private Colleges (n=4) (see Figure 2.2 below). Our data represents 71% of potential University participants, 44% of potential Institutes of Technology and 36% of potential HECA colleges.

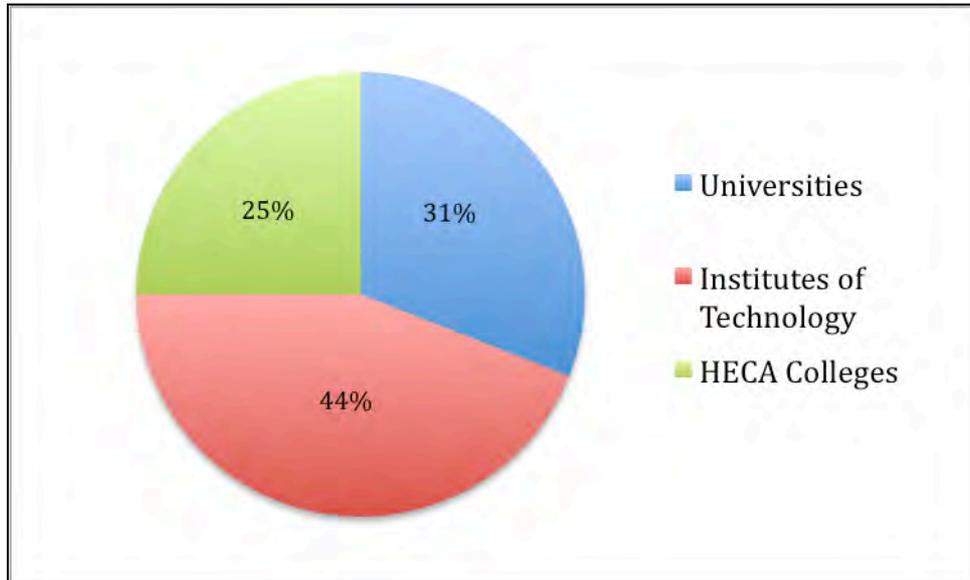


Figure 2.2 Participating institutions by institutional type

A broad range of data was gathered from these sixteen institutions. This included survey reports, internal reports, and qualitative responses for the years between 2011 and 2014 (see Table 2.2 below). The data collected had already been anonymised by the home institution to conceal any individual student details, but a second round of data anonymisation was undertaken once the files were received. Each institution was allocated a code number, as detailed in the table below, to ensure that any student quotes were completely de-identified.

2.5 Data Analysis

This research concentrates on the qualitative responses that students gave on their reasons for leaving higher education in Ireland. Just over 4,000 (n=4,036) responses were gathered from the sixteen higher education institutions that agreed to participate. The data existed in the variety of formats detailed above and underwent an initial screening by the researcher to identify which was usable. In some cases, the material was deemed to be irrelevant, as it did not contain qualitative data, a key parameter for this study.

Once the data was considered appropriate to the research context, it then had to be “cleaned” and brought together. Some of the data was provided in the

Table 2.2 Data received from participating institutions

Code number	Institution Type	Data Received	Includes Qualitative Data?
1	University	Internal Report 2011-2012 Internal Report 2007-2012 Exit Interview Data 2013-2014	Yes
2	University	Survey Report 2009-2010 Survey Report 2010-2011 Survey Report 2011-2012	No
3	University	Graduate Research Internal Report 2009 Exit Interview Data 2013-2014	Yes
4	University	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
5	University	Exit Interview Data 2012-2014	Yes
6	IT	Survey Report 2011-2012 Survey Report 2012-2013 Survey Report 2013-2014 Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
7	IT	Internal Report 2014 Exit Interview Data 2013-2014	Yes
8	IT	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
9	IT	Survey Report 2013 Survey Report 2014	No
10	IT	Internal Report Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
11	IT	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
12	IT	Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
13	HECA College	Internal Report 2015	
14	HECA College	Internal Report 2011 Exit Interview Data 2011-2014	Yes
15	HECA College	Exit Interview Data 2012-2014	Yes
16	HECA College	Internal Reports 2012-2014	No

form of an Excel spreadsheet making it relatively easy to combine into an electronic file. Other data had to be gleaned from a variety of reports or had to be input into Excel from hard copy interview data. Once all the data was input on separate sheets for each institution, an additional Master sheet was

created with all responses. This formed the Master Dataset that was later imported into NVIVO.

Given the size of the dataset, an initial content frequency analysis was undertaken. Content frequency analysis identifies commonly used words and identifies key themes within a data-set (Bryman, 2012). This analysis was not shaped by pre-existing/pre-expected themes, but was more inductive in approach as the themes were allowed to emerge from the data. This methodological approach was key to ensuring that the student voice could be allowed to emerge from the data, rather than forcing the data to support some pre-defined themes. As the data-set was quite large the software programme, NVIVO, was used to digitally collate the data to assess it for word frequency (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). The NVIVO programme identified a number of key themes as follows, in order of importance:

1. Course
2. Personal
3. Financial
4. Health/Medical
5. Family

While NVIVO provided these initial key themes for consideration, further in-depth analysis of the frequently occurring words was undertaken in order to assess how these themes occurred in context and to get a better understanding of the possible nuances within them. The larger themes were disaggregated to generate a number of sub-themes.

As the theme “course” occurred in such high frequency, it was important to further deconstruct it and to identify sub-themes. This was initially undertaken by re-examining the data through NVIVO and identifying word frequency in relation to “course”. This produced 12 sub-themes (Table 2.3 below). However, many of these sub-themes were interrelated and overlapped. Therefore, the data was re-examined, the interlinkages between them identified and sub-themes were renamed. In undertaking this re-examination

the researchers were mindful of not skewing the results by adding together terms that occurred within the same context (and possibly doubling or tripling word frequency). The four sub-themes “wrong course choice”, “course not suitable”, “unhappy with course choice” and “dislike course” were amalgamated into the sub-theme “Wrong Course Choice”. The sub-theme “CAO” remained relatively similar. The sub-themes “not interested in course” and “course not as expected” were brought together as “Course Interest and Expectation”. The sub-themes “transferred to another course”, “moving to a different college or course” and “offered another course” were incorporated together and renamed “Transferring”.

Table 2.3 Sub-themes relating to course choice

Disaggregated sub-themes	No. of responses	Major sub-themes	No. of responses
Wrong course choice	337	Wrong course choice	836
Course not Suitable	269		
Unhappy with Course Choice	130		
Dislike Course	100		
CAO (Mistake/Reapplying)	116	CAO (Mistake/Reapplying)	116
Not Interested in Course	261	Course interest and expectation	476
Course Not as Expected	215		
Transferred to Another Course	231	Transferring (includes some CAO reapplying)	590
Moving to Different College/Course	178		
Offered another Course	181		
Difficult – Course and College Life	267	Difficult – Course and College Life	267
Missed Lectures	193		

It must be noted that the theme “Transferring” is interlinked with issues relating to CAO and will be discussed in this context within the findings section. The “Difficulty” subsection remained similar, but for the purposes of the discussion on course it focuses specifically on course difficulty. Lastly, the sub-theme “missed lectures” was removed from this part of the analysis as

upon re-examination of the quotations it did not necessarily relate to course, but to personal engagement with college life.

Once the themes and sub-themes were identified, an interpretivist qualitative analysis was undertaken (Ritchie et al., 2014). This involved a comprehensive analysis of all of the individual responses, in order to unpack student behaviour and decision-making in relation to non-completion, set within the Irish context. While we recognise that there are of course commonalities across the higher education sector in Ireland, we also intuitively sensed that there could possibly be differences across the different types of institution within our Master Dataset. We thus separated the large dataset and re-ran the analysis by institution type to examine the relative importance of the key themes in each institutional context (i.e. University, Institute of Technology, and HECA College). From a policy perspective, this was considered important in order to potentially identify differences across the Irish higher education sector. These differences are examined in the following section.

2.6 Summary

This section has described in detail the methodological underpinnings of this study. An invitation was issued to all institutions affiliated to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, with an overall participation rate of 42%. This was broadly representative of the Universities, Institutes of Technology and the HECA Colleges. No College of Education agreed to participate in this study. Data collection was time consuming and significant effort was employed in accessing data that was potentially relevant to our study. While the data provided to us was anonymised to protect individual identity, a coding system was employed to de-identify the participating institutions. Data was analysed using an interpretivist qualitative approach, facilitated by NVIVO, generating five key themes that were further disaggregated to identify important sub-themes and to obtain a context-sensitive understanding of the data. A later stage of analysis identified differences in the dataset by institution type. In the next section, the findings from this analysis are discussed in detail.

3. Findings

3.1 Introduction: explaining student non-completion and non-progression

In this section, the key reasons for student non-completion and non-progression are identified. These findings were gathered from the cohort of 4,036 responses from sixteen higher education institutions in Ireland. The overall findings and key themes that were identified from this data is first outlined. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of each of the five key themes in detail, beginning with the main theme “course”. Lastly, comparisons are drawn from the data on the reasons for non-completion across the different institutional types that comprise the Irish higher education sector.

3.2 Overall Findings and Key Themes

Overall, five key themes related to non-completion were identified from the data. These were Course (n=2042), Personal (n=737), Financial (623), Health and Medical (610), and Family (462) (see Figure 3.1 below).

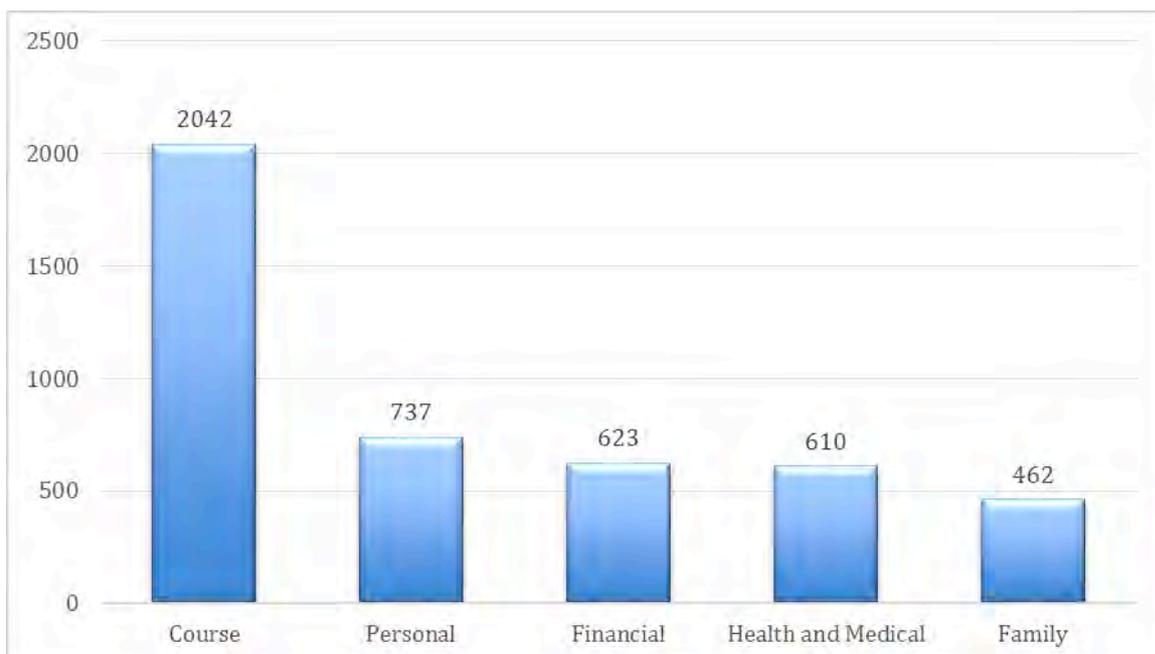


Figure 3.1 Responses by key themes for student non-completion

From an initial analysis of the data it is evident that the theme “course” was quite prevalent. When the raw data (student responses) was processed through NVIVO, it created a word cloud (see Figure 3.2 below). This word cloud is produced by counting the most frequently occurring words and generating an image of these words based on frequency. Therefore, the more often a word occurs, the bigger the text. It is evident from the word cloud below that “course” was the key reason for student withdrawal in the Irish higher education sector. This finding is in line with the international literature, which identifies that choosing the wrong course has a major impact on student withdrawal (Andrew et al. 2008; Christie et al., 2004; Quinn et al. 2005; Georg, 2009; Mashaba and Mhlongo, 1995; Yorke, 1999) and in particular on first year student withdrawal (Wilcoxson et al., 2011; Wray et al., 2014). The theme “course” dominates the data and therefore requires individual deconstruction. The next section examines this theme in more detail.

3.3 “Course” and student non-completion

Within the broad category “course”, a number of subsets are evident that indicate different reasons, and, therefore, the need for a variety of responses to reduce the overall number of student withdrawals. When fully disaggregated, a large number of issues relating to course choice emerged as important (as discussed in the previous



Figure 3.2 Word Cloud: Intensity of key influences on student non-completion

section). While this diversity of themes provided a clear illustration of the range of responses that influence student non-completion relating to course choice, for discursive and interpretive reasons these were combined to generate a smaller number of more meaningful themes for in-depth discussion. Figure 3.3 below summarises the five “course” sub-themes that emerged from our analysis. This includes a range of issues relating to “course” that result in students withdrawing: (1) wrong course choice; (2) transferring to another course, which also includes reapplying for another course; (3) issues relating to course interest and expectation; (4) course difficulty; (5) mistakes with the CAO; and (6) the student did not get their preferred CAO choice. The major sub-themes are discussed in detail in the next sections.

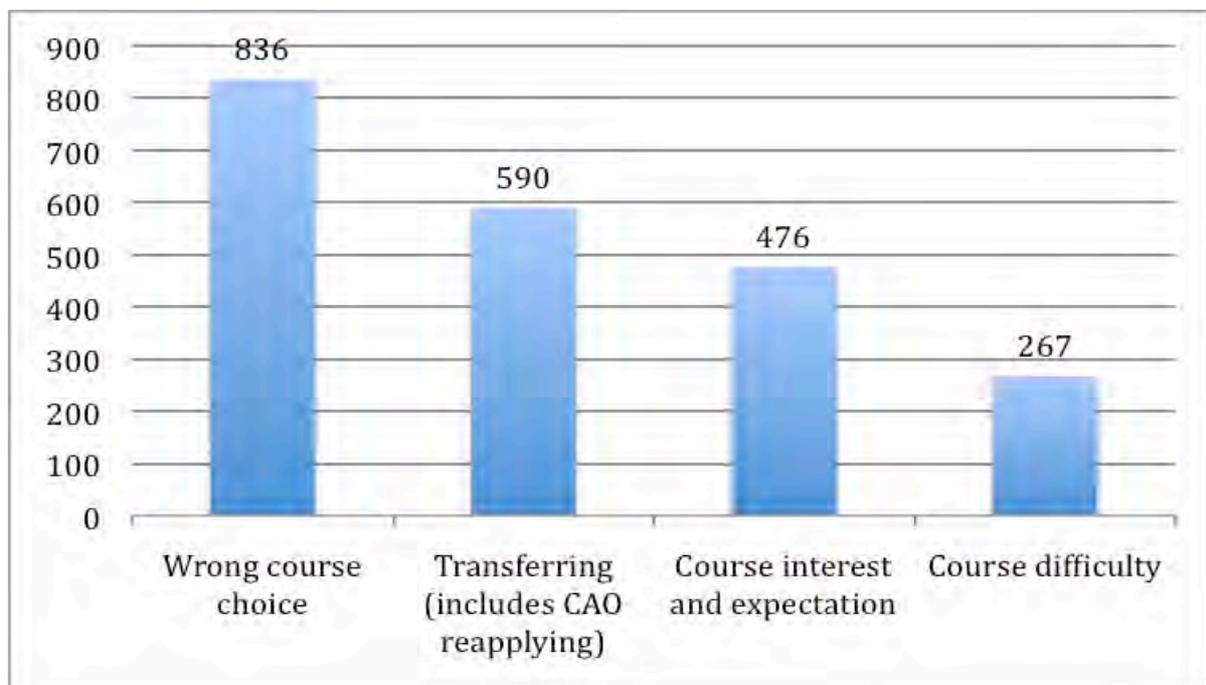


Figure 3.3 Key sub-themes related to course choice

3.3.1 Wrong Course Choice

The primary reason offered by students for withdrawal was wrong course choice. Although many of these students were offered the course they had chosen through the CAO process, the issue is that they made the wrong choice at application stage: *“I feel I made the wrong decision when choosing it during 6th year, I was under a lot*

of pressure as my parents split up" (University, 5712). In understanding this issue, it is worth considering the timing of the CAO application process. The majority of students (who are entering higher education following the Leaving Certificate) must make a decision on their CAO choices during their final terms of secondary school when they are also under pressure with mock and final state examinations. This pressurised context can lead to students making uninformed or rushed decisions. Linked to this, students indicated a perception that they had inadequate guidance in choosing a course: *"...was told incorrect info on jobs this course leads to by school career guidance"* (IT, 6105), and some stated that they were not fully informed about the requirements of the course. The literature shows that this can be due to lack of research about the course on the part of the student, or lack of guidance from the students' social network or those within second and higher education institutions (Martinez, 1995).

Secondly, some students felt that the course was an incorrect fit for them as individual learners: *"[I] found the college great with excellent facilities, simply the course wasn't for me"* (University, 5815); *"...felt course was incorrect choice and wants a different career"* (IT, 11153), or the course was not suited to them: *"I was not as suited to the course as I thought I might be. I enjoyed certain aspects but I found it difficult to enjoy most of it. This wasn't due to the course content or how it was presented, I just wasn't compatible with it"* (University, 5697). This type of observation illustrates a sophisticated understanding by students of the need to find a match between their interests and their chosen course. Rather than blaming themselves or the course, they simply recognised that the combination just did not work.

A third reason cited by students in relation to wrong course choice was that they simply disliked the course: *"I had a very unpleasant experience at X and dislike my course"* (University, 5689). Lastly, students did not see a future for themselves in a particular subject area *"I have lost interest in business and no longer wish to pursue a career in business"* (University, 5901). This links to the concept of "goal commitment" referred to in the literature (Weng, Cheong and Cheong, 2010), which highlights that students need to not just passively attend higher education; but have a clear vision for their future careers and a goal for which to strive.

3.3.2 CAO and transferring

The next sub-theme evident within the broad category of “course” (and linked to the issue of wrong course choice) is that the course the student gained was not their preferred higher education choice. Course choice is directly linked to the CAO points system that operates in Ireland. This determines the course a student takes at higher education on the basis of points achieved in the Leaving Certificate state examination. Some students left their course as they made a mistake in completing their CAO form, e.g. *“Made a mistake while completing my CAO application, the course possesses little interest to me”* (University, 5878). It is worth considering why students make mistakes on their CAO application, given that they have a “change-of-mind” window from the time of their initial application in spring until early summer. This may be indicative of the confusion surrounding the operation of the CAO system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students use the initial CAO application to merely register and they use the “change-of-mind” window to make their proper course choice. Furthermore, students are making these decisions during a critical time-period (February to July): when they may have completed their Leaving Certificate examinations and are basing their course choice on expected examination outcomes.

For a much greater proportion of students, the course they were offered through the CAO system was not their first option for higher education and it was often well down their CAO wish list: *“course not my 1st choice”* (IT, 6131); *“didn’t really want this course, was my 9th CAO choice”* (IT, 6124). In these cases, students tended to have paid little attention to their interest/suitability for a course that they placed at the lower levels of their CAO preference list, trusting that they would get into the course of their choice. This may be due to various reasons, such as undue optimism, a poor performance in the Leaving Certificate in comparison to their previous academic performance at second level, or they may have made their selection for reasons extraneous to their studies, for example *“My brothers did the course here – I thought I would like it”* (IT, 684). For others, it was simply “Hobson’s Choice”: *“this was the only CAO offer [I got]”* (University, 1158). Students who found themselves in a course they did not really actively choose nor want, stated that they were lost as to

what to do next: *“It wasn’t my first choice and was an alternative if I didn’t get the course I wanted. When I got it I felt I should give it a try and might like it but it turns out it wasn’t for me as I am a science oriented student”* (University, 51407); *“ I didn’t like the course, [I] only accepted it for the sake of doing a course in college”* (University, 5545). This latter observation may be reflective of a societal pressure or expectation on students to transition to any higher education offering after secondary education, even if the course is not within their preferred area.

However, while all of the above may be conceived as “push” factors, in that students felt they had no choice but to leave college given the wrong decision they had made, student non-completion is not always such a negative issue. A significant finding of this research is that a large number of students who left their course had new, positive plans in place. This included repeating the Leaving Certificate in order to reapply to higher education, transferring to another course or institution, or taking up employment. Students who opted to re-sit their Leaving Certificate indicated that they had given much thought to their situation: *“My first choices on CAO were science and I have decided that I would like to go back and repeat the leaving cert to achieve enough points for science next year”* (University, 5991). Others had reapplied through the CAO for another course in the same college to begin the following academic year: *“I have been offered another course at X [same institution] through the CAO which I have accepted”* (University, 5948), and some students had got a place in the same academic year *“recheck of Leaving Cert, got [name of other college]”* (IT, 11851).

This finding aligns with the literature (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Christie et al., 2004; Georg, 2009) and re-emphasises that students do not withdraw on a whim, they often have clear plans in place, and in a large proportion of cases, the plan is to transfer to a different course or higher education institution. Some do so because they are offered another course (which in some cases was a higher CAO choice): *“I got offered another place in another course that was originally my first choice on my CAO”* (University, 5795). These students did not initially get the course they wanted, but they possessed the agency to improve their situation and to stay within the higher education sector. For these students, withdrawal from their initial institution was a positive step, as they were moving to a course they preferred. Others, clearly

shaken by finding themselves in a course they had chosen but now did not want it, decided to take time out to think about and plan for what they would do next: *“I was young when I filled out my CAO and didn’t know what I wanted to do at the time. I have realised what my real interests are and now recognise that although [name of professional course] is a fantastic career, it is not for me”* (University, 5967).

3.3.3 Course Interest and Expectation

A substantial number of students stated that they withdrew from their course as they lacked interest in it: *“not as interested [in the course] as I thought I would be”* (IT, 674); *“I picked a course I had no interest in because I didn’t know what I wanted to do and I felt pressure to go to college”* (University, 5575). Once again, we see how students can make ill-informed choices due to the pressure that exists in Ireland to attend higher education education following the Leaving Certificate. Other students stated that the course was not what they expected it to be: *“I felt that very few modules related to what I am interested in and what I expected [name of course] to be like”* (University, 5497); *“The course isn’t what I expected it to be, I made a wrong choice”* (University, 16); *“My expectation v/s reality of the course were two very different things”* (University, 51099); *“I am withdrawing from my programme as it is not what I expected. I have realised that I want to do a completely different course elsewhere”* (University, 5554); *“The course was not what I had expected it to be, and I felt rather out of my depth”* (University, 5619). These quotations not only illustrate how students lack knowledge about the courses they are choosing, but also show that what they expect to be learning in higher education is substantially different from reality. Student’s do not always realise the scope of their chosen course and what it entails (Martinez, 1995), and references to incorrect student expectation of higher education are frequent in the international literature (Gibney et al., 2011; Yorke, 1999). Furthermore, the lack of fit between expectations and reality might be reflective of a difficulty in transition between different learning styles in secondary school and higher education.

It is worth noting that this theme also included those that got the course of their choice, but discovered it was different to what they had anticipated: *“I got my first choice but it was not what I expected, [the college and course was] not for me”*

(University, 1162). This raises questions regarding the type of information available to students to inform their decision-making, the type of marketing and recruitment that is commonplace across the sector, and the possible gap between the perceptions of higher education and the reality of the level of work involved. This may also have implications for particular groups of students who have lower levels of cultural and/or social capital. Students who are the first in their family to attend higher education have fewer people to turn to for academic advice. Indeed, the range of support networks available to students has a significant impact on how they deal with a range of issues in higher education (Christie et al., 2004).

3.3.4 Course Difficulty

Related to course expectation, a number of students referred to course difficulty as a key influencing factor shaping their decision to withdraw from their programme. Students state that they found the course difficult: *“Found course difficult, not as expected”* (University, 1153); *“The course was not what I had expected it to be, and I felt rather out of my depth. I do not feel like the course met my expectations as regards learning and direction and I felt as if I was making no headway for the entire year”* (University, 5619). This issue links to the discussion in the previous section on student expectation of higher education. Furthermore, students who were not interested in the course found it difficult: *“not interested in the course, first year extremely difficult”* (University, 5360); *“Didn't like the course, wrong choice. Found it difficult”* (University, 177). Indeed, it is likely that if a student chooses a course that they lack interest in, it will be difficult for them to engage with the course content. This may also relate to student self-efficacy and the relationship the student has with those teaching the course. In cases where students are attaining lower grades, if they receive positive feedback around effort, they may be more likely to continue with their course (Maher and Mcallister, 2013).

Difficulty with the course content is another issue for students: *“...having difficulty with course content”* (IT, 611). Some students found certain aspects of the course difficult: *“found some of the course modules hard to grasp”* (University, 5550); *“I just felt completely out of my depth which brought on a lot of anxiety. I picked a course with a strong biological background in which I was lacking”* (University, 51362).

Furthermore, they express difficulty due to lacking particular skills: *“Found the course difficult without computer skills”* (University, 1174). Indeed, many students expressed difficulty with specific aspects of the course: *“the maths were too difficult”* (IT, 11153); *“Struc[ural] Engineering wasn’t for me, found some modules difficult-chemistry, physics and calculus, I am reapplying to CAO in 2015”* (University, 51321); *“I am finding my economics module very hard and overwhelming and think that I would be better in something else. I struggle with maths and did not realise that economics was very maths based”* (University, 5574). These quotations indicate how students can be quite uninformed about the course content and this may be linked to insufficient attention to the details of the course when selecting CAO preferences: *“[there was] lots of web development – I hated that. I didn’t research it enough or ask the right questions”* (IT, 717); *“I have been finding it very difficult to fit into college life. I am also finding some things very hard, example maths”* (University, 51104); *“I believe that this course is poorly advertised in the prospectus. It is stated nowhere that there is no emphasis on X in first year. Also due to demand, I could not do X, a module that highly interested me. Instead I had to do Y in which I had no interest and found very difficult to pass, I was not enjoying the course at all”* (University, 51131). This quotation highlights the distinctive gap there may be between the marketing of a course/institution and the material reality of course content.

Lastly, students found difficulty with the workload associated with higher education: *“Found it difficult to keep up with the assignments and work load associated with the course”* (University, 5996), and some did not anticipate the high workload involved in higher education: *“I found the course hard and required a lot of work and dedication which I hadn’t been expecting”* (University, 51364); *“I struggled with [the] academic challenge”* (University, 5561); *“I am struggling a huge amount to try to keep up with pace of the programme and it is not the direction I want to go in”* (University, 5715). This links to the concept of “goal commitment”, whereby if a student lacks motivation and self-efficacy it is more likely that they will withdraw from their studies. However, if they are afforded institutional commitment and support they may be encouraged to persist with their studies (Weng, Cheong and Cheong, 2010).

3.3.5 Course and Other Interrelated Issues

The theme “course” is interlinked with a number of other issues relating to higher education. For some students, course choice was one of a number of interrelated issues that caused them to withdraw. This included course choice and college life: *“Incorrect course choice and difficulty settling into higher education”* (IT, 11812), and issues relating to integration, friendships, loneliness, commuting, and readiness for higher education: *“I was unhappy with my course, as I expected it to be different. I found the college too big and getting to know people was really difficult. The journey to and from college each day is on average 3-4 hours which wastes too much time, I cannot afford to live on campus or closer to the college”* (University, 5678).

The data suggests that absenteeism is an issue intertwined with course, long commuting times, and loneliness: *“I didn’t enjoy X subject at all, had no interest in what I was learning. I found X very big, felt lost and alone. I have decided to work on a X (check quote) and hopefully go to [specific type of] college, the course just wasn’t for me”* (University, 5728). Some students state that due to issues of loneliness they wanted to do a similar course nearer to home and this issue is related to the theme “Family” which will be discussed below in section 3.7. Others found the the institution’s geographical/urban setting difficult: *“I liked the course but didn’t like/take to [city]”* (University, 5488); *“I found it very tough to adapt to city life across the country away from family and friends’* (University, 5744); *“I was offered another course in another [name] college, I had more friends there”* (IT, 629). While academic issues are obviously the key driving factors in shaping student withdrawal, these quotations highlight the complex nature of student non-completion and the need for a multi-pronged approach in recognising the impact of the broader social context on student performance and decision-making.

3.4 Personal reasons for student withdrawal

Following the broad and complex theme “course”, the next key factor for withdrawal is of personal reasons. A lot of the student responses in relation to personal reasons were quite brief and often just stated: *“personal reasons”* (IT, 12550), with not a lot of detail being available on the specific reason, for example: *“few things going on, wasn’t able for course due to personal issues”* (IT 6112). Perhaps these short

responses were due to issues of privacy or embarrassment. However, we do have some indication from the data that personal issues may relate to personal motivation: *“personal reasons: lost interest and motivation, not sure if repeating would help me”* (University, 163), which links to the discussion on self-efficacy above (Weng, Cheong and Cheong, 2010). Students also referred to family circumstances: *“personal goals in life have changed, personal interest in academic [life] have changed, family issues”* (University, 568). Furthermore, personal reasons may relate to student readiness and preparedness for higher education: *“personal issues, having trouble settling in, stressed”* (University, 164), or issues related to mental health: *“personal issues, which all lead to an unsuitable state of mind and lack of concentration for a school [University] environment”* (University, 5863). The academic environment in which the student is located has a significant impact on how they perceive their higher education and their sense of belonging. As the international literature shows, if students feel isolated they are more likely to withdraw (Thomas, 2004).

Quite often the reason offered for non-completion included personal factors in conjunction with a range of other reasons, for example *“personal and financial reasons”* (IT, 12553), or *“personal circumstances changed, childcare was an issue”* (IT, 6132). It is likely that the reasons for withdrawal in this category were a combination of issues relating to course and personal reasons, combined with one or more of the themes discussed below, i.e. financial, health/medical, and family. Cameron et al. (2010) found that students withdrawing for personal reasons tended to withdraw later in their programme. However, the data collected for this project is mainly from first year students and indicates that personal concerns are a factor in student withdrawal. This is possibly linked to the increasing proportion of mature students currently participating in higher education in Ireland.

3.5 Financial reasons for student withdrawal

Given the time period during which our data was generated – in the midst of an economic crisis and the context of austerity (2011-2014) – one might have expected that financial issues would loom large in the responses. Although this was not the case generally, issues related to finance are evident for a minority. Firstly, this

included living expenses, accommodation, and travel costs. This was especially evident with students moving from rural to urban areas. They noted the increase in the cost of living: *“Financial reasons: the cost of staying in X is too high and cannot afford”* (University, 5808); *“[city] costs [are] too high”* (University, 5649). Commuting students mentioned the expense associated with this: *“the daily commute was too expensive”* (IT, 616), *“petrol costs from commute, I am a single parent – too much time spent travelling”* (IT, 637). This aligns with the work of Blaney and Mulkeen (2008) who found that students who are ineligible for on-campus accommodation and are forced to commute showed higher levels of withdrawal. Commuting is also mentioned in relation to the time it takes from home and the impact this has on a students’ social life (discussed further in relation to the theme “family” in Section 3.7). In the international literature, finance has been found to be a major issue for mature students, but less so for younger students (Krause et al., 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2008). As the majority of responses gathered for this research are from standard entry students in their first year, our findings are in line with the international studies. However, it is important to note that unlike the situation in the UK (where student loans are available and the debt burden is pushed into the future) (HEFCE, 2000), in the Irish context, the funding model makes financial issues, when they arise, an immediate problem.

Secondly, the issue of finance appeared to impact more on those within the HECA sector who pay full fees. However, while fees in the Higher Education sector in Ireland are significantly below those in the UK, one of the consequences of austerity has been an increase in the student registration fee that has occurred in tandem with cuts to exchequer funding. In such cases, the costs associated with fees are an important factor in the decision to discontinue a course: *“Financial reasons: paying full fees is more expensive than I thought, with living expenses, etc.”* (University, 121), *“Financial reasons, sudden increase in fee”* (University, 5934). However, this is not solely linked to the HECA sector, as we found some students struggling financially because they did not qualify for the local authority grant scheme: *“Financial issue, didn’t qualify for grant and has to pay fees”* (University, 1173); *“no grant for repeat year, can’t afford it”* (University, 5828); *“the application for a grant has been declined, financial reasons”* (University, 5422). Financial difficulties are also experienced by those that do not have funding (such as post-graduate

students): *“Financial difficulties, it has become impossible for me to pay the fees, I do not have funding”* (University, 5546), or their funding was cancelled *“financial reason, the scholarship has to be cancelled”* (University, 5516).

Thirdly, some students state that as they are experiencing financial difficulties they are withdrawing to take up employment: *“Financial circumstances in family have led to me taking full time work”* (University, 5849); *“Financial difficulties - has been offered employment”* (IT, 11245).

Lastly, financial difficulties may also be experienced due to unforeseen family circumstances: *“Earlier in the year my mother fell ill. She is unable to offer support to me for the coming year, (rent, bills, fees, etc.) I am therefore working for the year in order to save and return to college next September when it is financially possible”* (University, 5567); *“The arrival of a second baby in a family with single income has made it financially impossible for me to continue in my postgraduate programme”* (University, 51203); *“I have gone through significant family and financial changes recently including the death of my mother, I lost interest in my course and many other things. I do hope to further my education but that this is not the right path for me to go down at current time”* (University, 51251). Our research illustrates that a variety of unexpected life circumstances can impact upon a student financially and lead them to withdraw.

3.6 Health and medical reasons for student withdrawal

Students referred to a variety of health and medical issues as reasons for withdrawal. In relation to health, this predominantly related to emotional and mental health. Some students explicitly referred to mental health issues: *“unable to cope because of depression”* (University, 5602); *“eating disorder”* (University, 5651); *“diagnosed with severe depression”* (University, 5880). These illnesses may have been pre-existing conditions, but other students referred to a range of emotional issues more directly attributable to their time in higher education. This included anxiety, tiredness, and a generalised sense of disconnection. Some students felt isolated due to large class sizes, a lack of friendships, and loneliness: *“the scale of the classes [made] it difficult to make friends and to settle in happily”* (University, 5202); *“class sizes too big, too difficult to meet people”* (University, 5298). A number

of studies have found that a sense of isolation is an important influence on withdrawal (Blaney and Mulkeen, 2008; Yorke, 1999; Yorke and Longden, 2008). It is probable that these feelings were likely experienced over a period of time, leading to gradual disaffection culminating in the final withdrawal decision. Being aware of this downward spiral of motivation, lack of engagement, reduced self-efficacy, and poor performance is crucial in understanding student withdrawal but also points to potential opportunities for intervention.

Feelings of being lonely and homesick were reasons given by those whose college choice necessitated a move from rural to urban areas or to an institution too far from home to make commuting an option: "*Place nearer home, thanks*" (IT, 881). As many students finish their Leaving Certificate at quite a young age and must make the transition to higher education in a very short space of time, it can be more than they can cope with at this stage: "*too young*" (University, 143), "*overwhelmed*" (University, 1102). Some students withdrew due to a number of interrelated reasons relating to higher education and mental health: "*Too much material coming at me at once and outside my limitations to cope without seriously impairing my mental health, also a recent bereavement of someone who was close*" (University, 5718); "*As well organised and coordinated as the course is, it wasn't for me. I also suffered from a lot of anxiety due to my inability to fully engage in the modules and ultimately felt that my withdrawal was the best option for my own mental health and stability*" (University, 51295). These statements show that a student's sense of belonging to their educational community is very important and points to the need for academic early warning systems as a possible intervention tool across the higher education sector.

On the other hand, there were those, albeit considerably lesser in number, whose personal medical circumstances were such to prevent them continuing on their course. In such cases, life got in the way to the extent that they could not manage to keep up with their studies. The illnesses named serve as a reminder that some students have much to deal with at a time of life when the majority of their contemporaries enjoy good health: "*I had a kidney transplant, [I] should not have returned full-time, I needed more recovery [time]*" (IT, 6114); "*this student was in a serious car crash last week and will not be returning to college in the near future*

[report from college officer]" (IT, 11543); *"constant flare ups and pain due to rheumatoid arthritis"* (University, 51391); *"chronic illness fibromyalgia"* (University, 5406); *"cancer treatment"* (University, 5888); *"discs in neck went, had a cert already and loads of experience so didn't bother returning"* (IT, 647); *"Due to an ongoing chronic pain condition I will be unable to continue my studies at X, I have previously taken LOA from my course to undergo medical procedures but have found these procedures to have had little effect. I do hope one day I will be able to return to X"* (University, 5920). For other students a range of medical and mental health issues impacted upon their decision to withdraw: *"Broken arm, mental health issues, partner had affair, son using hash, not attending much"* (University, 196).

Students also stated that they withdrew as they had to provide care and support for a family member(s) suffering from health issues: *"Due to an unforeseen occurrence of a health issue with a family member requiring my support which greatly reduces my available study time I have no option but to completely withdraw from the course"* (University, 5992). Many of these illnesses were unforeseen: *"Left due to serious medical conditions with his Father"* (IT, 11571); *"Due to illness of a family member I was unable to participate further in full time education programme"* (University, 5900). This topic overlaps with the issue of family reasons, discussed in the next section.

What is not known, of course, is the extent of help (on offer, and availed of) to assist such students to continue their studies. It is noteworthy that some students express disappointment over a lack of concern by the institution: *"I decided to leave X due to the fact I felt I was not receiving proper support. I had mental health problems for over a year and felt I was not supported in my illness as best I could've been"* (University, 5589). This issue of the "student experience" is important and policy responses could perhaps be better informed by student satisfaction surveys. However, a student's "experience" can be very subjective and it is difficult to differentiate between academic student support and more pastoral support services. Indeed, in reference to the above quotation, the student refers to *"proper support"*. While from the students' perspective, the purpose of the institution is not just to provide education alone, students may also have an unrealistic expectation of the extent of support/safety nets which are appropriate.

One of the key policy issues raised in this study is the definition of a “student” in Ireland. For example, the grant system requires full-time participation. Consequently, at a time when they might most need some financial flexibility those encountering physical or mental health issues are impacted by the requirement of full attendance in order to keep their grant and thus perceive that they are in a no-win situation.

3.7 Family reasons for student withdrawal

The final key theme relating to student withdrawal is family issues and/or other commitments. This included major family incidents that affected the wider family, including the student, *“father’s bankruptcy, family moved to England”* (University, 51043), which forced the student to relocate and therefore withdraw, *“Difficult family situation arose which means that the student needs to be near home”* (University, 1110). Family difficulties can cause students to withdraw, return home and take up employment: *“An emergency situation back home. I need to support my family for certain reasons and start working again”* (University, 51307).

A number of students offered family reasons as the reason for withdrawal, but details about this are not disclosed. However, linked to the previous section, a number of students referred to family medical issues: *“XX had advised in writing that he was needed at home due to accident his father had”* (IT, 11467): *“Family reasons: husband ill, has been diagnosed with amnesia”* (University, 113): *“Family reasons: daughter ill, hit by van after getting off school bus, head injury”* (University, 116). The literature suggests that these issues often particularly affect more mature students (Krause et al., 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2008). Some students stated that they needed to take time to deal with these issues or to move home in order to be closer to their family and to provide care: *“due to an unforeseen occurrence of a health issue with a family member requiring my support which greatly reduces my available study time, I have no option but to completely withdraw from the course”* (University, 5992). These quotations illustrate how the Higher Education system is perhaps too rigidly structured for students in such situations, indicating the need for a system whereby students are able to bank course credits and/or be more easily mobile across courses and institutions.

Also linked to a previously discussed theme is the issue of loneliness in relation to the family. Students stated that they wished to be nearer to their home and family: *“too far away from home”* (University, 58); *“Parents would prefer if I studied closer to home”* (University, 5714). They also referred to long commute times between home and the higher education institution: *“did not suit and travel time from home took too long”* (University, 5437); *“transferring nearer home for family/financial reasons”* (University, 5980); *“too far from home and not driving so 4.5 hr train journey at weekends”* (IT, 6101); *“transferred to complete the X year [institution] - nearer home”* (IT, 6115). These statements related to various issues discussed earlier, namely commuting and to the costs of travel (in terms of time and money) and accommodation. Examples of gruelling commuting schedules demonstrate how it can affect students’ social life, both in the context of home and the higher education campus: *“Constantly getting up at 5 am and finishing at 7.30pm. Had no other time. [I] lost my social life”* (IT, 736). Indeed, Astin (1975) and Bozick (2007) found that those that commute have less time to engage academically and socially within higher education.

It could be argued that students’ discussion of family and home really relate to the experience of transitioning to a new environment and creating a sense of belonging in college. Palmer et al. (2009) showed that students who develop a stronger sense of belonging by being present in the institution are more likely to remain in higher education. This is particularly important for first year students, as most decisions to withdraw are made at this stage (Christie et al., 2004). Often, it is their social networks that play a key role in supporting students and helping them to persist and to be more resilient when needed.

Finally, issues relating to family and home were frequently combined together and it is difficult to disaggregate one from the other: *“mental exhaustion due to family situation”* (University, 5121); *“significant personal and financial changes, including mother’s death”* (University, 51251). Overall, the data illustrates that sometimes students withdrew due to family issues that are both unforeseen and out of their control. It is admirable that they were assisting family members and foregoing their education to do so. These testimonies highlight the importance of students in these

situations being appropriately supported if they wish to continue, or that they are provided with the opportunity to re-enter higher education in the future.

3.8 Comparison of higher level institutions

Thus far this section has outlined the overall findings on reasons for student withdrawal from higher education. This data is further analysed to assess if differences exist across the various institutional types involved in this research, namely the University sector, Institutes of Technology, and HECA Colleges. Overall, a relatively even number of responses were gathered from the University sector (n=1942) and the IT sector (n=2084), while the data from the HECA Colleges was substantially lower (n=34). Therefore, the University and IT sectors are more easily comparable. This section begins by examining each sector individually and then offers an overall comparison on the reasons for withdrawal across the institutional types.

3.8.1 The University Sector

From the University data it is clear that the main reason for withdrawal was course (see Figure 3.4 below), followed by personal reasons, financial reasons, issues relating to commuting and accommodation, medical reasons, and lastly family reasons. These findings are in line with the overall results from the main cohort of data but, it will be noted, not in the same proportions.

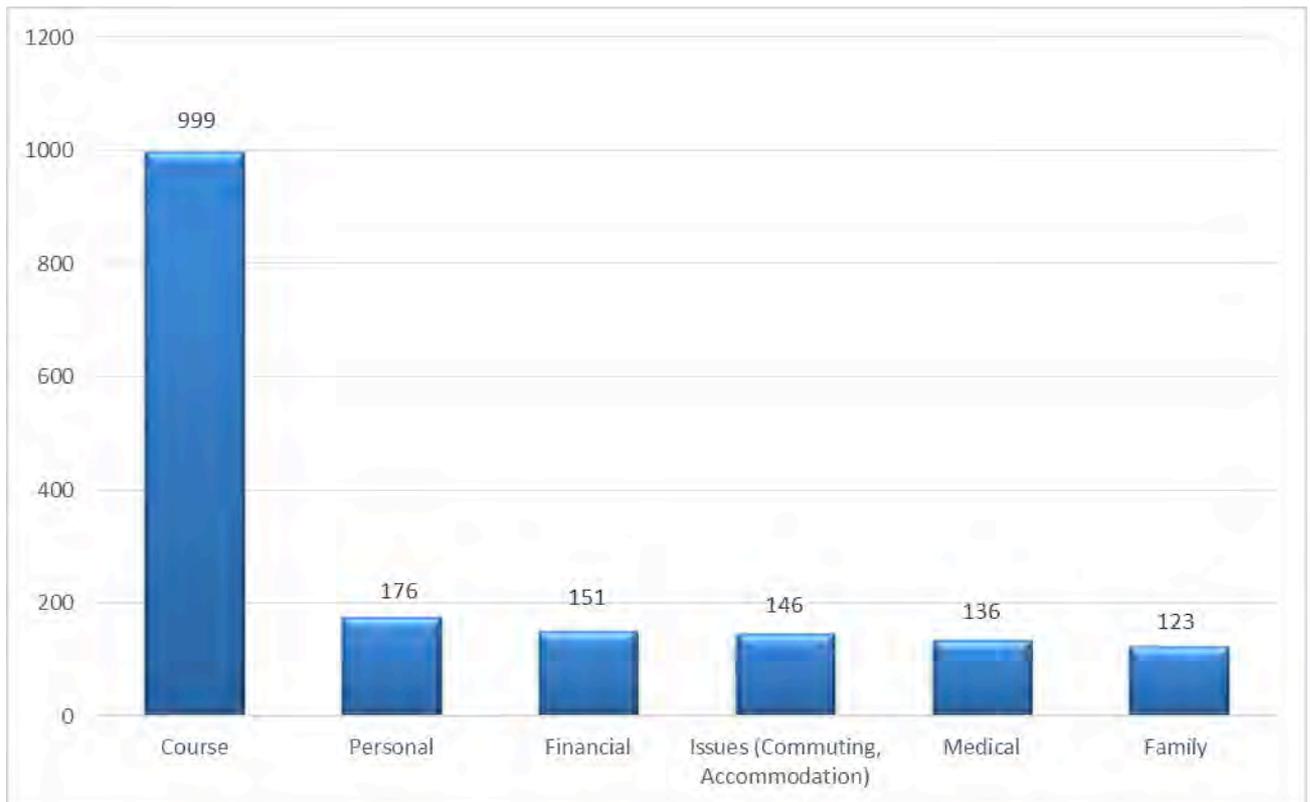


Figure 3.4 University data

By disaggregating the theme “course” (see Figure 3.5 below) it is clear that students withdrew from the University sector mainly because they transferred to another course. These students either actively relocated to another course/college themselves or they were offered another course through the CAO system. The second key reason that University students offered for withdrawal in relation to “course” was that they were uninterested in or unhappy with the course, or the course did not suit them. The final reason offered in relation to “course” is that students chose the wrong course. All of these factors overlap and interact in various ways, but do indicate that the key reasons for University students withdrawing from their programme was to do with the course choice.



Figure 3.5 University sub-theme “course”

3.8.2 The Institute of Technology Sector

As indicated in Figure 3.6 below, “course” was also the main reason for withdrawal for students in the IT sector. There were four other reasons for withdrawal including: personal, financial, health/medical, and family reasons. Although these core reasons are similar to the University data, as well as the data for the higher education sector as a whole, it is notable that all of these issues occurred to a greater extent proportionally than for those withdrawing from the University sector. The data suggests that those attending the IT sector are more likely to identify non-academic issues as the reason for withdrawal. It is worth noting that this may be related to the students’ background. As the UK literature indicates, more students from disadvantaged backgrounds or with a lower level of preparedness and a lack of cultural capital attend post-1992 Universities (equivalent to the IT sector in Ireland) and thus are at a greater risk of withdrawal (HEFCE, 2000).

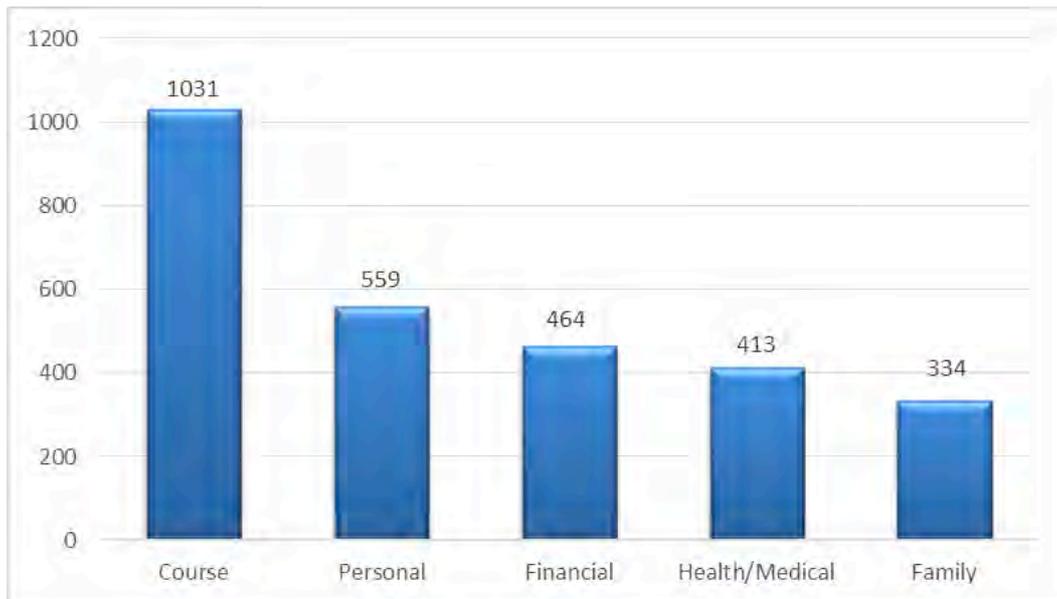


Figure 3.6 Institute of Technology data

In relation to “course”, the key issue for those within the IT sector was wrong course choice (see Figure 3.7 below), which included issues relating to disliking the course, finding it unsuitable, and finding that the course was not what they expected it to be. The other issues relating to course included students finding the course difficult and having no interest in the course. Within the IT sector we do not see as much mobility compared to the University sector, where students are mainly transferring to another course. Also, course difficulty was a key issue for those within the IT sector. This may be related to student expectations of the course they chose and/or not realising either the course requirements or the level of course difficulty. This issue is keenly linked to the CAO points system, where courses are ranked by demand, rather than level of difficulty. On the whole, points tend to be lower for courses in the IT sector and therefore tend to attract less academically successful students. However, courses requiring lower points are not necessarily easier. Therefore, in Ireland there is a cohort of students who are achieving lower CAO points and gaining a place in a course that may not be in high demand, but where the level of difficulty is high. In the Irish higher education sector course perception is a big issue and many unsubstantiated assumptions are made in relation to course level.



Figure 3.7 IT sub-theme “course”

3.8.3 The HECA College Sector

The data available on those that withdrew from the HECA sector is minimal. Nonetheless, the key reasons for withdrawal were finance, course difficulty, family, and work reasons (see Figure 3.8 below). It is notable that the key reason for withdrawal was finance, different to both the University and IT sectors. Those attending HECA colleges must pay fees, which can range anywhere from €2,000 to €12,000 per academic year. Therefore, finance is more likely to be an issue for these students.

Although course difficulty was an issue for those within the HECA sector, it was not the main reason for withdrawal. This may be due to the high proportion of mature students attending HECA colleges, who may have a clearer idea of their interests and goal commitment. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the data available for the HECA sector is minimal and it is difficult to make definitive conclusions based on this data.



Figure 3.8 HECA sector

3.8.4 Comparison of Higher Education Institutions

In comparing Ireland’s higher education institutions, it is evident that there are key distinctions between the sectors. Figure 3.9 below illustrates the issues in relation to student withdrawal across the institutional types. On a point of clarity, it must be noted that as students offer multiple reasons for withdrawal, the number of themes is higher than the number of discrete responses. This Figure allows comparison of how the themes occur proportionally across the higher education sector, and illustrates the proportion of responses in relation to these categories across the institutions.

Although there are clear distinctions between the higher education institutions, it is striking that course is an important issue for all sectors. Issues relating to course were a major factor for both the University and IT sectors. Although course was an issue for the HECA sector, it was not the key concern. Indeed, the main reason for withdrawal from the HECA sector was financial. It is noticeable that personal issues were a significant concern within the IT sector, while they were lower down the scale within the University sector, and they do not occur within the HECA sector. It is also evident that although finance was a concern across all higher education institutions (in particular in the HECA sector), it was not as large a concern as one might expect

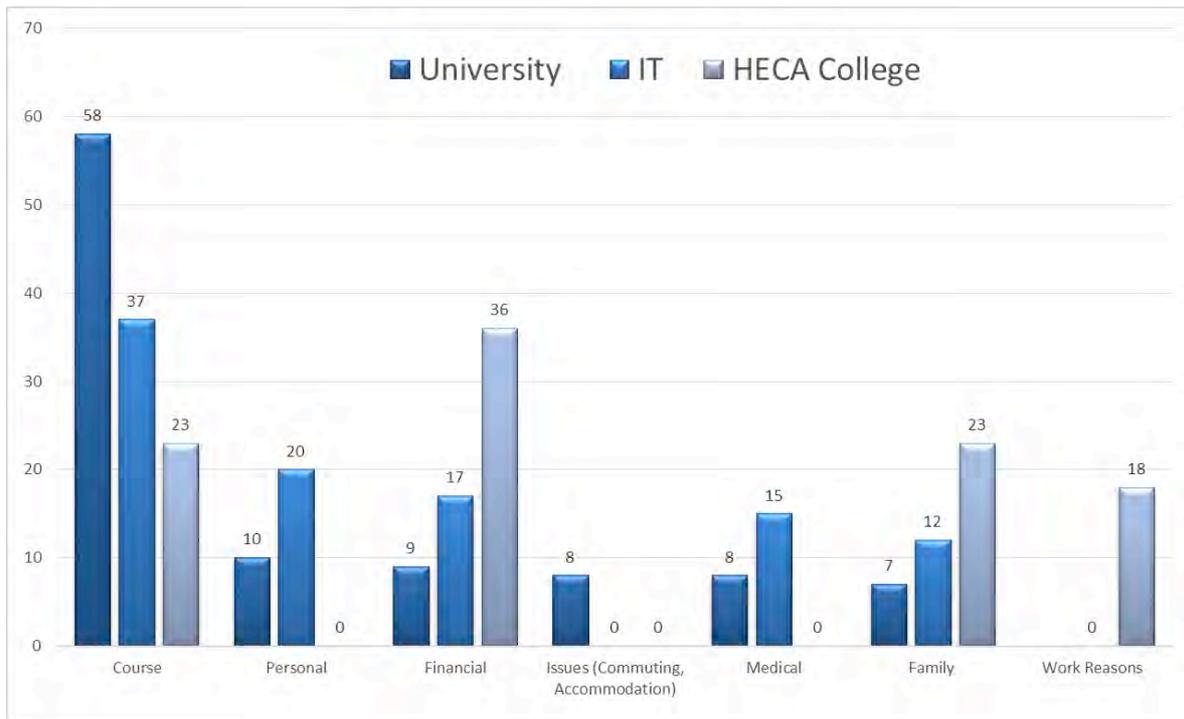


Figure 3.9 Comparison of Higher Education institutions

in a time of economic austerity. Issues relating to commuting and accommodation only emerged as a concern for the University sector, which was surprising. This may be because those within the University sector are more likely to undertake long commutes from rural to urban areas. Medical reasons were proportionally higher for the IT sector than the University sector, and did not appear in relation to the HECA sector. Family issues were mainly an issue for the HECA sector, followed by the IT sector, and then the University sector. Work reasons were almost solely a concern for those within the HECA sector. This may be because it is mainly mature students who attend the HECA sector and they may be undertaking their studies part-time in conjunction with employment.

Overall, in disaggregating the reasons for withdrawal across the Irish higher education sector, it seems that students who withdrew from the universities were doing so due to “push” factors because of a disconnect – either academically or socially – with the current institution. A substantial proportion of these students transition to another institution/course. Those who withdrew from the IT and HECA sector were primarily experiencing “pull” factors related to personal circumstances,

including financial, medical and family reasons. Therefore, any policy responses to these issues must be mindful of these distinctions.

3.9 Summary of Findings

Section three has outlined in detail the findings of this research. It began by relaying the key themes that emerged on reasons for withdrawal and explored each of these reasons in detail. The section concluded by identifying the distinctions across the higher education sectors in Ireland. Overall, this research finds that the main reason for students withdrawing from higher education in Ireland is related to their course. However, it has also been highlighted that issues related to course do not exist in a vacuum and are interrelated with a number of other, highly complex and multi-layered issues. These findings point to a need for a holistic approach to address this issue in the best interest of both the student and the institution. Arising from these key findings, the next section offers a number of recommendations.

4. Recommendations

It is evident from the discussion thus far that there is wide a disparity of available data within the higher education sector on why students withdraw from their chosen course. This ranges from no data being gathered on a formal basis, through to pro-forma “tick box” categories, to some detailed information recorded from exit interviews or from the responses to open ended questions on exit forms. Where information does exist, it is a rich source of information that allows for a fuller understanding of the reasons why students leave and thereby the generation of evidence-based proposals as to how student withdrawal might be addressed more effectively in the interests of both the students and the institutions. The recommendations arising from the findings of this research will be divided into three categories: the individual institution response; policy implications for the HEI sector as a whole; the potential role of the National Forum in progressing research and best practice in increasing retention of students in higher education. While the recommendations have been categorised in this way, clearly the complexity of the issue requires a collaborative approach between all of the stakeholders to address it effectively.

4.1 Decreasing non-completion - Higher Education Institutions

According to our findings, matters pertaining to course and course choice were by far the most common reason for students to withdraw from their higher education studies. The student voice, as articulated through the qualitative data collected, gives insight into such issues in the sector as a whole, as well as differentiating between the elements that make up the sector. However, as stated above, there is considerable disparity between what, if anything, is collected by the individual institutions to gain more in-depth understanding of why and how a student decides it was in their best interests to leave, despite the feelings of failure it can engender. This indicates the need for the following:

Recommendation 1: Systematic and standardised qualitative data should be gathered as a matter of course by all higher education institutions from students who withdraw from their course.

Recommendation 2: Development of a common exit form that includes open ended questions seeking to elucidate why such a decision has been reached; what, if anything, might have helped them to stay; and whether or not the student plans to re-enter higher education in the immediate future.

From the methodology section of this study, it will be evident that considerable effort had to be expended on accessing information about existing data from the participating institutions. Moreover, it was found that some institutions were currently engaged, or had been engaged recently, in research projects on student withdrawal. It is important that such valuable data be utilised to its maximum and duplication of effort within and across institutions be avoided by building reciprocity in the research process. Therefore we recommend that:

Recommendation 3: An *appropriate* person should be the designated contact for Teaching and Learning research in each HEI and this person should be clear about their role in assisting the National Forum in regard to ongoing research projects.

Recommendation 4: Irish higher education institutions should be fully informed of all ongoing research projects and made aware of the added value of such research, so that any assistance required will be provided to maximise impact.

Results from the data collated by our study show issues related to course to be by far the most common reason for students withdrawing from their studies. Further interrogation of this data reveals the complexity of this reason and why multiple approaches are needed to address it. Wrong course choice is a recurring theme, needing multiple approaches to ensure that second level students are best prepared for making informed decisions when completing their CAO Application Form. Aligned to this, is the issue of the recruitment/marketing strategy of the institutions when trying to attract potential students. The question arises as to whether the information provided makes clear the course content and demands, and whether the minimum requirements in a particular subject (e.g. maths) are pitched at a sufficiently high level to ensure that those on the margin will be able to cope. For courses with high levels of student withdrawal, the following recommendations warrant consideration:

Recommendation 5: Review of the marketing strategy and its “fit” with course content and academic demands.

Recommendation 6: Review of entry requirements in relation to students’ second level subject choices and Leaving Certificate results in areas of particular relevance.

Recommendation 7: Review of assessment feedback and academic support structures with particular focus on the first three months of a programme, thereby creating an “academic early warning system”.

Recommendation 8: Reviews of internal transfer mechanisms and supports to ensure that such opportunities are maximised for students who might otherwise withdraw.

Recommendation 9: Audit of the academic and administrative supports needed to identify and advise students who have become disenchanted with their chosen course.

Recommendation 10: More focus on general learning skills at higher education in the early weeks of first year, as well as building curricula interventions that promote student engagement and student resilience in their higher education studies.

Recommendation 11: Identifying students from intake statistics who might be particularly vulnerable to poor social integration either because they are the only one attending from a particular second level school, or whose home is a considerable distance away.

4.2 Decreasing non-completion – Higher Education Policy Development

It is clear that the decision to withdraw is not an easy one from the student's perspective given the feelings of failure, regret and a concern about possible family reactions. On the institutional side, it represents a loss of revenue which can be sizeable and a missed opportunity for another prospective student. Its scale makes it an important policy issue for higher education education as a whole and by sector, in terms of sub-optimal use of valuable resources. It is clear that the solution cannot be reached by means of a single change, but rather requires a multi-layered approach that encompasses second as well as higher education educational policy and practice. The first step is to examine how the issue is defined. The fact that quite a high proportion of students indicated that they were planning to move to an alternative course/institution via the CAO, suggests that:

Recommendation 12: Student non-completion should be viewed differently, not as a failure or problem, but rather an indicator of the need for greater ease of student

mobility within the higher education sector, thereby enabling a student to create their own “career plan”.

Recommendation 13: Attention could be paid to students who enter (often with high points) the professional programmes, only to find that this is “not for them”. The earlier such students can be identified, the better their chance of finding an alternative better suited to their skills/interests.

Recommendation 14: Systematically track students who withdraw and subsequently reapply for an alternative course via the CAO system to see if they successfully complete their second programme, dividing the cohort into those who apply for the same type of course in another institution and those who apply for a different course, whether in their own or another HEI. This could help to inform future transfer policy in this area.

Second level students can feel under general pressure from many sources, themselves included, to apply for higher education courses. Many of those who subsequently withdraw choose their courses, it would seem, with insufficient attention, information and advice, on what would be best suited to their interests and skills. Therefore, maximum impact on retention requires:

Recommendation 15: Increased career guidance, information and advice to students applying for higher education to help them to make the best possible choices, including those further down their list of preferences. Such support needs to happen well in advance of the decision-making deadlines, perhaps during

Transition Year, focusing on both academic advice and emotional preparedness.

In addition to course issues, other factors impacted on the students' decision to withdraw from their course. One clear area of concern was the effects of commuting, often associated with difficulties in accessing affordable accommodation within reach of the student's educational setting. As can be seen from the responses quoted above, students could spend up to 4/5 hours commuting per day with the associated feelings of exhaustion and disengagement. Transport links were an additional factor that could compound the difficulty, whereby students had to take a circuitous route or wait for connecting links that could add to the time spent in transit. This indicates the need for a two-pronged approach to student retention:

Recommendation 16: The need for affordable student accommodation within reasonable distance of a HEI, particular for first year students, to facilitate their engagement in the course and their integration into the academic and social life of the institution.

Recommendation 17: The strategic planning and development of adequate public transport links to each HEI as students are one of the social groups most dependent on public transport.

Another important factor in understanding student withdrawal is the impact of serious physical and/or mental ill health on some students' capacity to engage with their course. As indicated in the responses quoted in the findings section, some students enter college with serious pre-existing conditions, while others develop them during their studies. Although the majority of this age cohort tends to be in good physical health, the range of severe physical illnesses that can occur is clearly demonstrated in this research. In the case of mental health, however, students are in an age category highly vulnerable to the development or exacerbation of mental health issues and these can be

compounded by the experience of higher education. Students who withdraw on account of physical and/or mental illness tend to be educationally committed and do so reluctantly, often with the hope that they might return to complete the course in the future. Whether or not some of these students could have been able to continue on a lower workload is an area that warrants attention. The capacity of the HEIs to be responsive to student need in this area can be hampered by the student grants structure with the undergraduate free fee being conditional on the student being in full-time education, with fees payable for part-time programmes. Thus, two recommendations arising from the findings are:

Recommendation 18: Review of the SUSI scheme to enable more flexibility for students who develop serious physical and/or mental health issues during their studies.

Recommendation 19: Gathering cross-institutional data on the proportion of students withdrawing for health reasons that subsequently return to complete their course.

In addition, there are the students who withdraw for personal, other than for health, reasons. The data shows that personal reasons are associated with a variety of factors including loneliness, missing friends and/or family, or feeling they are not ready for the move to higher education. Clearly there is overlap in some situations with, for example, transport difficulties (as discussed above) and with general unhappiness with the institutional context. To facilitate the student's readiness to enter the higher education sector and to embrace the educational experience on offer, consideration could be given to:

Recommendation 20: The development of more transition support/preparation for those entering the higher education sector, perhaps in the form of short summer programmes between their fifth and sixth year of secondary education to better inform their CAO choices.

This broad category of personal reasons also relates to students who withdraw for family or employment reasons. Particularly in the latter case, the most helpful approach would be to:

Recommendation 21: Increase the opportunities via part-time provision to enable students who become gainfully employed or become primary carers to complete their course.

For students who withdraw for family reasons, this is often due to a change in family circumstances, whereby the student feels they must prioritise their family commitments over their studies. We do not know the breakdown in the data provided to us between mature students and those who entered directly from second level, but it is likely that the former are more likely, though by no means exclusively, to be affected in this regard. Students who decide to withdraw for family reasons could be encouraged to continue if there could be:

Recommendation 22: More flexible, part-time provision which could enable students to stay in higher education, achieving a workable balance between their studies and family commitments.

Recommendation 23: Adequate, affordable crèche facilities and/or a grant towards the extra costs of childcare for students with pre-school and early school age child dependents.

4.3 Decreasing non-completion – the Role of the National Forum

For students with serious illness, those who are isolated, who are anxious about their studies or are trying to juggle the competing commitments of family and study, student support services are a vital part of higher education provision. There are many aspects of such services that are relevant for students who withdraw and there are issues surrounding the adequacy of

provision, availability of staff at appropriate places and times, and the visibility of the service from the student and staff perspective. Yet, relatively little is known about student support services in the higher education sector as a whole. The National Forum, through its research focused projects, could play a lead role in the development of this area by supporting:

Recommendation 24: A research project scoping the provision of existing student support services within the Irish higher education sector.

Recommendation 25: Such a study could be the precursor to the creation of national standards on student support services for HEIs in Ireland.

As discussed above, there is a need for each institution to systematically gather information on why students withdraw from their course and what, if available, might have changed their decision. Ideally this would be by means of a form that would be common to all institutions. The common form and standardised collation of the data arising from this project would allow anonymised data to be shared across institutions so that commonalities within and between different elements of the sector could be readily identified. Thus, the findings from common programmes across the sector as a whole, as well as comparison across different programmes within and between institutions, would be possible. It would enable differences across time to be tracked so that the effects of changes made in response to feedback could be understood from the students' viewpoints. With the support of the National Forum,

Recommendation 26: The standardised form would be the outcome of a short-term project that would engage all of the institutions in the creation of a common set of questions that would provide valuable data in a user-friendly format for both the institution (in terms of collating the data) and the student.

To minimise the high costs associated with student withdrawal, it would be worthwhile to put some resources into better understanding the process by which students complete their CAO preference list, what informs their preference choice and the resources they use to help them to make these decisions. This could involve:

Recommendation 27: A qualitative study with incoming first year students on the process of their CAO selection of preferred courses, tracking in particular, the attention given to their less preferred choices.

Recommendation 28: A study of students who considered withdrawing from their studies and decided, on balance to continue. This would provide valuable insight into the “pull” factors within the course and institution that can result in this outcome and provide an evidence base for targeted support.

Recommendation 29: For the student population in general, and particularly in regard to first year students, consideration should be given as to how the results of the ISSE might be used to explore some of the issues that contribute to student withdrawal.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Initial letter to institutions



UCD College of Human Sciences

Newman Building
University College Dublin,
Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland
Email: Niamh.Moore@ucd.ie, Suzanne.Quin@ucd.ie



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

X January 2015

Dear X,

The National Forum has funded a qualitative study on '*Why students leave higher education in Ireland*'. All 3rd Level institutions affiliated to the Forum are invited to participate in this national study of a very important topic in higher education. This project is led by Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry and Professor Suzanne Quin, University College Dublin and we write to invite you to participate by providing any qualitative data you hold on why students do not complete their course e.g. unpublished reports, institutional briefing documents, student exit interviews, records of support staff dealing with withdrawing students. Please note that this does not include students who fail their course and must leave on this account.

Specifically we ask you to provide us with:

- A copy of any research carried out since 2000 within your institution on student withdrawal that includes any qualitative material.
- Any qualitative data gathered from the academic year 2011/12 to 2013/14 (inclusive) on the reasons why students leave, the name of the programme from which they withdrew and the year of study on withdrawal.
- In the case of those who did not complete their first year, please indicate, if possible, the specific point in the academic year that the student left their course.
- If possible, please also distinguish between students who entered their programme directly from 2nd Level and non-standard entrants including mature, HEAR and DARE students.

We are aware that your institution cannot provide any data about individual students unless it is anonymised and that this might make demands on stretched administrative resources. With this in mind, the National Forum is willing to support

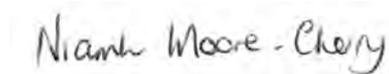
the study by providing direct finance to your institution, up to a maximum of €500 for administrative support for the purpose of anonymising such data. Institutions should invoice the National Forum directly, quoting the project title as reference with an outline of the costs incurred.

We are on a very tight deadline for this research having just received the funding and the final report due in late May, so we would appreciate if:

- You would respond by **Friday 23rd January** to let us know if your institution is willing to participate.
- If Yes, the name of the contact person we can liaise with for such data, a copy of the relevant report/s and an indication any other type of relevant data your institution holds.
- If you do not hold any data relevant to the study, please inform us, as this is important to know too.
- Responses and any data should be sent directly to Dr Elaine Burroughs, who is the full-time researcher on this project, at studentnon-completion@ucd.ie
- You are welcome to contact us with any queries (niamh.moore@ucd.ie, 716 8222 or Suzanne.quin@ucd.ie, 716 8698).

We look forward to engaging with you in this study as student withdrawal is of national and international concern with serious consequences for the individual student, each higher education institution and the higher education sector as a whole. The means to address it must be evidence based and go beyond the statistics to understand why students make such choices.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry

Professor Suzanne Quin

Appendix 2 Survey for non-participating institutions

Institution Participation Survey

Institution: X

Q1: What were the key reasons for your institution not participating in this research project? Please tick the two most important reasons

- Lack of resources
- Lack of time
- We do not collect this type of data
- Concern about anonymity
- Similar research being carried out in our Institution at this time
- Too many requests for information at this time
- Other reasons (please elaborate below)

Q2: Does your institution have any existing qualitative data on why students do not complete their course?

No Yes

If yes, please indicate what type of data this is and what time-period it relates to (below):

Q3: What would enable your institution to participate in such research in the future?

Please tick the most important reason

- Increased financial support
- More information about the project
- More time to collect and submit the data
- Other suggestions (please detail below)

Q4: If there are any other comments please insert them here:

Thank you for your assistance.

Appendix 3 Second letter to institutions



UCD College of Human Sciences

Newman Building
University College Dublin,
Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland
Email: Niamh.Moore@ucd.ie, Suzanne.Quin@ucd.ie



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

X January 2015

Dear X,

The National Forum has funded a qualitative study on '*Why students leave higher education in Ireland*'. All 3rd Level institutions affiliated to the Forum are invited to participate in this national study of a very important topic in higher education. This project is led by Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry and Professor Suzanne Quin, University College Dublin and we write to invite you to participate by providing any qualitative data you hold on why students do not complete their course e.g. unpublished reports, institutional briefing documents, student exit interviews, records of support staff dealing with withdrawing students. Please note that this does not include students who fail their course and must leave on this account.

Specifically we ask you to provide us with:

- A copy of any research carried out since 2000 within your institution on student withdrawal that includes any qualitative material.
- Any qualitative data gathered from the academic year 2011/12 to 2013/14 (inclusive) on the reasons why students leave, the name of the programme from which they withdrew and the year of study on withdrawal.
- In the case of those who did not complete their first year, please indicate, if possible, the specific point in the academic year that the student left their course.
- If possible, please also distinguish between students who entered their programme directly from 2nd Level and non-standard entrants including mature, HEAR and DARE students.

We are aware that your institution cannot provide any data about individual students unless it is anonymised and that this might make demands on stretched

administrative resources. With this in mind, the National Forum is willing to support the study by providing direct finance to your institution, up to a maximum of €500 for administrative support for the purpose of anonymising such data. Institutions should invoice the National Forum directly, quoting the project title as reference with an outline of the costs incurred.

We are on a very tight deadline for this research having just received the funding and the final report due in late May, so we would appreciate if:

- You would respond by **Wednesday 4 February** to let us know if your institution is willing to participate.
- If Yes, the name of the contact person we can liaise with for such data, a copy of the relevant report/s and an indication any other type of relevant data your institution holds.
- If you do not hold any data relevant to the study, please inform us, as this is important to know too.
- Responses and any data should be sent directly to Dr Elaine Burroughs, who is the full-time researcher on this project, at studentnon-completion@ucd.ie
- You are welcome to contact us with any queries (niamh.moore@ucd.ie, 716 8222 or Suzanne.quin@ucd.ie, 716 8698).

We look forward to engaging with you in this study as student withdrawal is of national and international concern with serious consequences for the individual student, each higher education institution and the higher education sector as a whole. The means to address it must be evidence based and go beyond the statistics to understand why students make such choices.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Niamh Moore-Cherry

Professor Suzanne Quin