

## Forum Insights

### REPORT OF RESEARCH PROJECT 4

#### Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research into Student Non-Completion at Third Level in Ireland.

**This *Forum Insight* summarises the key aspects of a project which examined qualitative studies from institutions on Student Non-Completion. It will be of interest to students, teachers and managers in higher education.**

#### Introduction

As part of Forum's commitment to leading and facilitating evidence-based enhancement, it has funded a series of *Focused Research Projects* which were conducted over a six month period by higher education researchers in partnership with the National Forum. The projects were designed to provide a quick snapshot of the key issues and findings on a number of nationally important themes. Eight successful projects were awarded funding by the Forum following competitive selection, based on international peer review in December 2014. Ethics approval for the projects was granted through the higher education institutions involved and the National Forum's Research Ethics Committee.

Overall this work has started to create a body of targeted knowledge that can be used quickly to guide future practices in teaching and learning. It also shows institutions working together and in partnership with the Forum to use research to improve approaches to the learning experience.

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

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.

#### What did the study involve?

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. International literature on non-completion was also analysed as part of the project.

#### What are the key findings?

- Key academic issues from the research literature affecting patterns of retention and progression include: poor choice of programme; challenges of the transition to higher education; student academic and social integration; geo-demographic factors arising from wider participation in higher education; institutional environment and student fit (pp13-25).
- Over 4,000 qualitative responses for the years 2011-2014 were analysed using content frequency, this revealed that the key themes arising in order of importance were (p33):
  - o Course
  - o Personal
  - o Financial
  - o Health/Medical
  - o Family
- The category "course" had a number of sub-components which indicate a range of different reasons for student non-completion. These included: wrong course choice at the application stage; poor course fit with students' interests; active dislike of the course; course not first choice; expectations about course not met; course difficulty and broader issues relating to attendance and integration. While many of these factors led students to leave, a significant finding of the research is that a large number of students had alternative positive plans in place, suggesting that the decision to leave is often a positive step for students (pp36-44).
- For the category "personal reasons", the primary data often included rather brief statements which may be interpreted to indicate matters of privacy or embarrassment to students and these often seemed to intersect with the categories "family" or "financial" (pp45-46).
- Financial reasons for withdrawal were especially strong for students moving from rural and provincial settings to urban settings. Particular financial impacts were identified for those students attending HECA (fee paying private colleges). In addition changing life circumstances was also shown to impact on financial concerns (pp 46-48).
- Health and medical reasons for withdrawal related largely to emotional and mental health, which may have over time reduced engagement and led to withdrawal. (pp48-49).
- Family matters, where details were provided, generally related to major incidents which affected the whole family. For such students the need to be closer to home or to

assume fully or partly family responsibilities made it difficult to remain in higher education (p51).

- Comparison of the overall responses by institutional type shows that “course” is important for all sectors, though in HECA colleges financial concerns were of greater importance. Personal issues were a significant concern in the IT sector, but lower down the University scale where “course” featured most strongly. Finance was important across all institution types, though issues of commuting and accommodation were particularly important for the University sector perhaps reflecting the geographical dimensions of the student profile (pp53-59).

### **What are the implications of these findings for students, teachers and managers in higher education?**

The study highlights important implications for institutions for course development and organisation.

- Managers will be interested to know that the adoption of a systematic and standardised qualitative data gathering process across all higher education institutions is recommended. This should include open ended questions to explain why the decision to withdraw has been reached in order to increase understanding about student non-completion patterns across the higher education sector.
- Programme issues such as ensuring better alignment between marketing initiatives and the content and academic demands of a programme as well as a review of entry requirements are likely to be of particular relevance to managers and teachers.
- For teachers in higher education the importance of increasing the focus on learning skills and getting students engaged in learning activities early in their First Year may require further attention. Academic strategies such as an academic early warning system in the first three months are also relevant.
- Students and others should note that this report emphasises that non-completion can be a positive step in a student’s overall career plan;
- Managers in institutions should consider the need to evaluate the effectiveness of academic and support structures for students; processes for the identification of students who are more likely at risk, as well as better mechanisms for students to transfer internally on programmes. (pp 62-63).

### **Further Information**

on this project, including a copy of the full report please see:  
<http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/t-l-scholarship/national-forum-research-projects/>