

*Student Success and Retention Policy – 2017*

*With particular attention to First Years*

*The Faculty of Theology*

*St Patrick’s College, Maynooth*

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Catholic educational institutions offer everyone an education aimed at the integral development of the person that responds to the right of all people to have access to knowledge and understanding.

Pope Francis, *Address to The Congregation for Catholic Education*, 2014.

1. *Introduction*

In 2011, *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (The Hunt Report) advised that ‘higher education institutions should prepare first-year students better for their learning experience, so that they can engage with it more successfully’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Accordingly, it went on to emphasise the value of transitional programmes for the success of students at third level education. It stated:

‘a positive first-year student experience is crucial to achieving the goals of higher education; failure to address the challenges encountered by students in their first year contributes to high drop-out and failure rates, with personal and system-wide implications’[[2]](#footnote-2).

The Strategic Plan of the Faculty of Theology (*Desire to Flourish* 2015-2020) commits the Faculty to enhancing the student experience (Strategic Goal Two). Specifically, Strategic Goal 2.1 states that the Faculty will invite

students into a personable environment, equipped with appropriate resources and structures, that nurtures active and engaged learning, especially in first year.

While, any one goal is linked with other goals within the overall plan, each goal has been subdivided into a number of initiatives.[[3]](#footnote-3) Goal 2.1.3 states: “Draft a ‘Success and Retention Policy’ and implement its recommendations.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This discussion document is drafted by the Undergraduate Board in order to understand and therefore address the issues affecting the success and retention of students in their first year at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

1. *Overview: Statistics*

The Irish Higher Education Sector

A recent study from the HEA reports on the progression of students from their first year of study in 2012/13 to their second year of study in 2013/14.[[5]](#footnote-5)

* The headline figures records that 84% of full-time undergraduate new entrants progressed. Correspondingly, 16% did not progress.  This figure equates to 6,000 students across the sector.
* It reports that this compares favourably to international peers and has remained stable since 2007/08.
* Non-Progression rates varied across the sector ranging from 26% and 28% at level 6 and 7 respectively compared to 11%, 17% and 6% at level 8 in universities, institutes of technology and colleges respectively.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Females have higher rates of progression than males across all levels and sectors.
* There is a significant relationship between prior educational attainment (based on Leaving Certificate points) and progression rates. Keeping in mind the average non-progression rate is 16%, the rate for students who obtained 255 to 300 rises to 34% and falls to only 7% for students who obtained 555 to 600 points.

While urging “a strong focus on the transition from school to college,” Mr Tom Boland, the then CEO of the HEA commented that the figures are a “a source of concern. Further research into the issues surrounding student retention is necessary so that by understanding the causes we can deal with them. Issues of particular interest include the connection between academic preparedness of students and student engagement with college.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Faculty of Theology at St Patricks College, Maynooth

Student retention is an important task and indicator for a small institution as St Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

Of the suite of undergraduate programmes, Bachelor of Theology and Arts is of strategic concern. Figures for the Academic Years 2012-2013 to 2015-2016 are available in Appendix A.

The topline figures appear to show an improving trend in that time. Taking the figures as a whole

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic Year** | **Numbers (2nd Year/1st Year)** | **Percentage** |
| 2013/14 | 32/58 | 55% |
| 2014/15 | 40/43 | 93% |
| 2015/16 | 41/44 | 93% |

However, there those figures need further nuance. Of particular note, is the retention of students who begin the programme on campus. If we bracket out students who transferred from All Hallows College and the Kilkenny Campus along with returning and repeating students, the Progression Rate figures are:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic Year** | **Numbers (2nd Year/1st Year)** | **Percentage Prgression** |
| 2013/14 | 32/58 | 55% |
| 2014/15 | 26/43 | 60% |
| 2015/16 | 27/44 | 61% |

The rate of non-progression is significantly worse when compared to the figures across the sector as provided by the HEA. In sum, the programme is retaining short of two-thirds of first years.

The good topline figure is because the attrition of students in first on campus is being offset by the number of students transferring into second year from the Maynooth University Kilkenny Campus (and are not registered as first year in the PU figures).

The figures point to two broad conclusions:

1. the ongoing importance of the Kilkenny campus
2. the importance to enhance success and retention of first year students on campus.

Therefore, both matters are of vitally important to the ongoing sustainability of the programme and need to be supported as a matter of priority.

On average over the three years, the reasons for not proceeding to first year in descending are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Reason** | **Percentage** |
| Failing to Progress / Pulling Out | 50% |
| Repeating Year/Deferring | 25% |
| Transferring to MU | 20% |
| Other (eg Joining Seminary) | 5% |

1. *Literature Review*

As noted above, HEA studies point to a strong link between prior educational attainment and successful  progression. Regardless of the sector or level that a student enters, research reports that students with lower leaving certificate points are less likely to progress to the following academic year.

This being said, there is rarely one single cause across the cases of non-completion. Research points to a variety of reasons why students leave higher education, including personal, institutional and social factors.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Differing levels of readiness and the widening participation into higher education, including those who are first generation higher-level students many from non-traditional backgrounds, can affect the transition and therefore the student experience and retention rates. Other influences can include family background, peer group, socioeconomic status and academic preparation.[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. *Purpose of the Policy*

A First Year Success and Retention Policy is an identified initiative of the Strategic Plan and a response to recent Quality Assurance Reviews. It aligns with the vision and mission statement of the Faculty of Theology.

The ultimate goal of a Success and Retention policy is to improve the higher educational experience for everyone. Protecting the higher standards of education at St Patrick’s College is vital and a strong success and retention policy among first years will continue to protect and uphold these standards.

By addressing this issue, the Faculty is seeking to enable a positive experience for all students, enhance the reputation of the College, and be effective in the use of limited resources.

A coherent strategy recognises that this issue is multi-faceted, involving the complete student experience and so requires the contribution of all the sections of the College in an integrated manner. Initiatives, if they are to be successful, require the support of all staff. In time, they will become another feature of the culture of the College.

A systematic and comprehensive set of initiatives should lead to an increase in the annual retention rates and a percentage increase in graduation rates. For a small institution as ours, this is not to be underestimated.

1. *Principles to Inform Action*

Future strategies arising out of this document will be informed by the following principles:

1. Supporting the conditions that encourage retention is an integral element of the responsibility of the Pontifical University as a higher education provider
2. Addressing issues of retention is multifaceted and therefore must account for a number of issues
3. Retention is the responsibility of all staff
4. Particular focus will be paid to first years
5. Retention should not be at the price of lowering academic standards among students
6. Focused decisions are to be made in the context of on-going evidence gathering.
7. Experiences – positive and negative – should be listened to within a supportive context and at regular periods
8. Appropriate resources should be allocated to the support of initiatives where necessary.
9. *Towards A Strategy*

Cook, Ruston and McCormick identify four areas in which potential strategies could be imagined:[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. Prior to entry
   1. Students should have realistic expectations. Therefore information should be accurate and realistic about the level of commitment (time and financial). Wrong programme choice is a significant reason for first year students leaving.
   2. Collaborations with second level education providers and other institutions may be explored to ensure smooth transition
   3. Foundation and qualification programmes should be considered to provide a stepping stone to higher education for prospective students
2. Transition (induction) into First Year
   1. All students should receive a comprehensive induction to the institution and to expectations of the programme.
   2. Approachability and a sense of belonging are common features of successful learning environments. Therefore, induction should have a particular focus on getting to know the environment, other students and the staff of the College.
   3. Registration and all such related student services should take place within the first week of entry – at latest within one month – so that all students can gain access to services at a timely basis.
   4. Transition should be seen as a longer process than ‘orientation/induction.’
   5. Mentoring systems when done well have proven to be effective. Mentors may be academic-to-student or peer-to-peer. Priority then should be given to the first semester, allowing students to raise issues of concern. In facing more difficult situations, students should be guided to appropriate campus student services.
3. Module Delivery and Academic skills
   1. The first year curriculum should be relevant and appropriate and reviewed regularly. Excellence in delivery at this stage should be prized.
   2. Teaching and learning should foster student engagement. Obviously, students should put in time and effort. Research shows that it flourishes within a culture that fosters active involvement – within the classroom and on campus.
   3. High expectation in delivery can foster the personal commitment of students.
   4. Additional support services for areas that are particularly challenging should be provided.
   5. A culture that supports peer learning among students helps create a community of learning that models to first-years good practices.
4. Staff Development and Awareness
   1. Often academic staff is the primary point of contact for students with the College. Staff should be aware of the variety of supports available to students across campus.
   2. At risk or poorly performing students should be identified as soon as possible and the necessary supports put in place.
   3. Students who withdraw from a programme should be facilitated in doing so in an informed manner. The College should note such reasons with appropriate documentation.
   4. Data collection, analysis, reporting and review of retention should occur regularly in order to identify patterns and put in place strategic response. The Pontifical University Office will be responsible for this statistical compilation and the Undergraduate Board will be undertake the review.
   5. Effective initiatives should be reviewed, amended and updated regularly and include all the relevant stakeholders.
5. *Potential Initiatives*

The following initiatives have been proposed at the Undergraduate Board for further discussion (October/November, 2016):

1. First year full time deliverers to coordinate academic initiatives as a team. The rationale is that they are best positioned to get to know the students themselves.
2. A system of mentoring to be undertaken by the full-time academic-staff who deliver first year modules.
3. Different Academic Skills will be given attention within each of the modules, building towards a more comprehensive set of skills. Such skills may include: footnoting, bibliography creation and research, avoiding plagiarism, presentation skills and so on. (The Undergraduate Board will also address this element under a programme review.)
4. Identify graduate attributes that can be focused upon from the first year.
5. Consider inviting other members of the Faculty to deliver an input on a topic about which they are passionate in order to expand the experience of the students. They would take one hour and it would be within the general field of the module.
6. Review of the Orientation Week. Keeping the spirit of orientation and transition throughout the first half term. It was suggested to consider the programme undertaken at UL (see Appendix). Given the resources of the Faculty, it may be that only some of the suggestions inspired by the programme are practicable.
7. Consider ways that improve a sense of student belonging to our College. Are there ways to foster the social interaction (examples may include a pizza night, pub quiz, etc.)
8. Consider a student pairing/mentoring system with other students.

**Appendix A**

1. *Statistics*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic Year** | **Course** | **Registered** | **of which ?? Are New Students to BATh 1** | **of which ?? Are Repeats/Deferrals to BATh 1** | **Over the AY Withdrew** | **Deferred this year to another AY** | **Total at end of year** | **Difference between Year 1 & 2** | **Difference between 2 & 3** |
| 2012-2013 | BATh 1 | 58 | 46 | 12 | 3 | 0 | 55 | lost 25 students , 3 repeated first year in 13/14, 16 failed to progress, 5 students transferred to MU, 1 student passed but didn't proceed or transfer to MU |  |
| 2013-2014 | BATh 2 | 32 | 2 are returning students into 2nd year therfore only 30 first years progressed into 2nd year | |  |  | 32 |  | Lost 3 students -1 repeated 2nd year and two failed to progress into 3rd year and dropped out |
| 2014-2015 | BATh 3 | 35 | 6 BATh Yr 3 Repeats, means only 29 2nd years progressed into 3rd year | |  | 2 | 33 |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Academic Year** | **Course** | **Registered** | **of which ?? Are New Students to BATh 1** | **of which ?? Are Repeats/Deferrals to BATh 1** | **Over the AY Withdrew** | **Deferred this year to another AY** | **Total at end of year** | **Difference between Year 1 & 2** | **Difference between 2 & 3** |
| 2013-2014 | BATh 1 | 43 | 35 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 38 | lost 12 students, 5 repeated Year 1, 3 students failed to progress, 3 students transferred to MU |  |
| 2014-2015 | BATh 2 | 40 | 8 transferred from Kilkenny, 4 from ALH, 2 are 2nd year repeat, means only 26 13/14 first years progressed into 2nd year | |  | 1 | 39 |  | lost 5 students between 2nd year and 3rd year, 1 transferred to BTh 2, 1 taking a year out, 3 repeating. |
| 2015-2016 | BATh 3 | 40 | 1 transfer from ALH, 2 BATH 3 repeats, 3 back after taking time out, means only 34 2nd years made it into third year | |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Academic Year** | **Course** | **Registered** | **of which ?? Are New Students to BATh 1** | **of which ?? Are Repeats/Deferrals to BATh 1** | **Over the AY Withdrew** | **Deferred this year to another AY** | **Total at end of year** | **Difference between Year 1 & 2** | **Difference between 2 & 3** |
| 2014-2015 | BATh 1 | 44 | 39 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 38 | lost 11 students, 1 student transferred to seminary, 3 repeated first year, 1 deferred, 4 students failed to progress, 2 transferred to MU, |  |
| 2015-2016 | BATh 2 | 41 | 9 transferred from Kilkenny five are BATH 2 repeats , means only 27 of 14/15 first years progressed into 2nd year | | 0 | 1 | 40 |  |  |

**Appendix B – A Case-Study**

*7. A Case Study: The First Seven Weeks at University of Limerick*

*Introduction*

First piloted in 2010/11 at the University of Limerick, the main aim of *The First Seven Weeks* is to support and prepare students for transitioning to higher education and to aid them in adjusting to new routines and intellectual engagement. The following is an outline of a review carried out by Yvonne Diggins, Angelica Risquez, Maura Murphy. The programme, they conclude, is an ‘extremely helpful resource’ and ‘sustainable,’ yet ‘intensive from the point of view of coordination’ requiring ‘adequate funding as well as strategic support’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The programme is organised around seven weekly themes:

1. Welcome, settling in and finding your way around
2. Study skills and time management
3. Health and wellbeing
4. Meet your advisor
5. Learner support centres
6. Career and civic engagement awareness
7. Critical thinking and longer term planning.

The communication platform was *Facebook*. A working group was assigned to each weekly theme to develop and source online materials (videos, photos, downloads, maps, etc.) to complement and communicate face-to-face events. In time an online ‘community’ of new, current and indeed past students was developed.

*Week One: Welcome, settling in and finding your way around*

Located in each of the main buildings are First Seven Weeks student guides. A FSW Hub is created on campus for students to visit. Through the Facebook page, students are provided with videos and maps of the campus buildings and lecture halls.[[12]](#footnote-12)

To welcome students, the programme launched a ‘Breakfast with your Dean’, which, as the title suggests, invites students to attend breakfast and meet their Dean, along with other students in their discipline.

The initiative encourages student contact with Faculty, considered a vital factor for student transition by research on this matter.

*Week 2: Study skills and time management and Week 7: Critical thinking and longer term planning*

New skills are required for students to adapt to study. The programme organises workshops and events focusing on study skills, critical thinking, planning, time management and the virtual learning environment, which are all announced through the Facebook page. Timetables can also be downloaded through the page.

*Week 3: Health and wellbeing and Week 5: Learner Support Centres*

The Student Support Services engage with students in week 3 and 5, include counselling, chaplaincy, medical centre, Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) and so on. The aim is to generate awareness of these supports among students.

*Week 4: Meet your advisor*

In UL, each student is appointed a faculty advisor. The aim is to develop a network of concerned lecturers with adequate resources to deal with the difficulties which students face. Through this system, student-faculty interaction is encouraged and promoted, with a view to contributing significantly to the broader development of students on campus. To note: while faculty-student contact is high, student’s use of the ‘advisor-system’ is low (only 34% made contact).

*Week 6: Career and civic engagement awareness*

During Week 6 representatives from a ‘Co-operative Education and Careers’ Centre’ answer student queries. It coincides with a Careers Fair on campus. First year students are interested in careers particularly with regards to future career choices and cooperative education work placement. A President’s Volunteer Award Ceremony is also held in this week.

*The Use of Technology/Facebook*

The review looked to how students used Facebook. There appears to be a very high usage of Facebook (94% used it on a daily basis in 2012). Furthermore, the page can generate high amounts of views beyond the student body itself. The review recorded:

The highest weekly number of people (unique users) who viewed a posting on the Facebook was on the 7th September 2011 (Week 1 – Phase 2) with 34,193 unique views of the page. This number was followed by 33,404 unique views of the page also in Week 1 of the programme. Out of 608 responses, 22% stated that the Facebook page was ‘very useful’; 54% stated that it was ‘more or less useful’; and 23% stated that it was ‘not very useful’. Out of 604 responses the top five resources accessed through the Facebook page were: 45% Events; 34% Useful Links; 24% Photos; 19% Discussions; 17% Videos.

*Conclusion and Future Developments*

The results of the review were encouraging. [[13]](#footnote-13) Suggested improvements from the students and the review itself focused on doing more with the structure by making more of the seven weekly themes and providing more on the Facebook page, especially to already existing services. It also acknowledged that reaching out to non-Facebook users needs to be further considered.

Overall, the structure is sustainable from a cost-benefit analysis – the technology is free, the updating is done by staff, faculty and students, and resources can be reused yearly.

Nonetheless, the authors of review also state:

in our experience, the advantages of social media may cover up the administrative and support resources required for them to be effective. It is important to note that online facilitated programmes and communication, similar to the use of Facebook within the First Seven Weeks programme, are not necessarily a cheaper solution. Indeed, they can be even more intensive from the point of view of coordination as it is expected that frequent communication will be maintained with increasingly large cohorts. Hence, return on investment is essential and best practice should be observed and maintained.

1. *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Faculty of Theology, *Desire to Flourish: Strategic Plan 2015-2020* (2015), 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Faculty of Theology, *Desire to Flourish: Agenda Setting Document* (2016), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education* (2016) The Higher Education Authority (HEA) gauge the students on March 1st of the year following registration. For further definition of terms see *Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, Part 1, Student Retention Policy*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For the sake of comparison, it is interesting to note the above average non-progression rates in the fields of Construction and Related, Services, Computer Science and Engineering. Computer Science has the highest rate of non-progression at level 8 but this varies greatly between universities (15%) and institutes of technology (26%) as well as between institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See http://www.hea.ie/news/hea-study-highlights-84-students-progressed-their-2nd-year-study [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education Institutions, 2010/11 to 2011/12 Report by the Higher Education Authority 2014. See: http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/hea-progression-irish-higher-education\_final.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Astin, A. W. Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25, (1984): 297-308; Irish Universities Quality Board, *Good practice in the organization of student support services in Irish universities* (Dublin: Higher Education Authority, 2006); Knox, H. Making the transition from further to higher education: the impact of a preparatory module on retention, progression and performance. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 29, 2 (2005): 103-110; Lowe, H. and Cook, A. Mind the Gap: are students prepared for Higher Education? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27, 1 (2003): 53-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [Anthony Cook](https://www.amazon.ca/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_1?ie=UTF8&field-author=Anthony+Cook&search-alias=books-ca), [Brian Stanley Rushton](https://www.amazon.ca/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_2?ie=UTF8&field-author=Brian+Stanley+Rushton&search-alias=books-ca), [Sinead Marie McCormick](https://www.amazon.ca/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_3?ie=UTF8&field-author=Sinead+Marie+McCormick&search-alias=books-ca)

    *Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition* (University of Ulster, 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yvonne Diggins, Angelica Risquez, Maura Murphy, *Supporting First Year Students in their Academic and Social Adjustment to Higher education. A Case study of the First Seven Weeks Programme at the University of Limerick*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. An app was also launched and QR codes on posters across campus. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Open suggestions from respondents on how to improve the Facebook page for future first year students includes comments such as ‘More advertising/Greater visibility/More awareness’; ‘More entertaining events/photos/reminders/info’; ‘link it better with other UL initiatives’; ‘more students from the older years to help out’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)