



# REACHING OUT: STUDENT DROP-OUT

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# **REACHING OUT: Student Drop-Out Project**

**Briefing Paper on Pilot Research  
Project**

## **Acknowledgements**

During 2014/15 the Union of Students (USI) in Ireland, in partnership with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, undertook a pilot research project to explore students' experiences of leaving college. Dr Pat Bogue of Broadmore Research was appointed to conduct the research. Particular thanks are due to all students who participated through the: online survey; follow-up telephone interviews; and USI Education Officers Focus Groups. The data provided has allowed a deeper understanding of the experience of leaving college to be gained and it has also informed the refinement of the survey and research approach for the future.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This briefing paper provides a synopsis of a USI student-led pilot research project '*Reaching Out*' which aimed to gain an understanding of the process of dropping-out for students who had decided to leave higher education. This paper summarises briefly the key issues emerging from the pilot project.

## 2. CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

The project was part of a suite of Focused Research Projects, funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, during the academic year 2014/15. It complemented two other funded National Forum Research Projects on non-completion: '*Why Students Leave*<sup>1</sup>' a qualitative analysis of existing institutional reports and '*Student Non-Completion on ICT Programmes*<sup>2</sup>'. All three projects ran concurrently.

This student-led project was unique for its focus on understanding the experiences of students facing difficulties with their courses and contemplating leaving college. It allowed the generation of anonymised vignettes recounting the stories of students who left higher education as well as their advice to fellow students from their experience. Both of these add a richness to current understanding of the lived experience of leaving higher education.

The pilot project also served to test the research methodology; promotion of the research and access to the survey instrument through social media. Its indicative findings are consistent with those arising in the international research literature as well as those arising from the other Irish non-completion projects.

## 3. THE PILOT RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project and the approach employed were approved by the National Forum Research Ethics Committee. The research study involved three main elements: an online anonymous survey of students who left college early; follow-up telephone interviews with students; and a focus group meeting of Students Union Officers (complemented with a further workshop).

### 3.1 Online Survey

The online survey sought both qualitative and quantitative information on non-completion from students who had left a higher education programme during the 2014/15 academic year. To avoid labelling students who had not completed their courses, a social media campaign to promote the research, based on voluntary completion of the survey, was coordinated by USI. The survey, hosted from the USI

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<sup>1</sup> Quinns, S & Moore-Cherry, N., (2015) Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research into Student Non-Completion in Higher Education in Ireland.

<http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Project-4.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> National Forum (2015) Student Non-Completion on ICT Programmes: Briefing Paper

<http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Student-Non-Completion-on-ICT-Programmes6NovDK.pdf>

website was completed anonymously and all students had to confirm that they were over 18 years of age. A total of 163 students completed the survey.

### 3.2 Telephone Interviews

Five interviews were completed with students who volunteered in their survey response to participate in this stage of the research by providing their first name only and a contact number. These interviews provided a more detailed insight into the factors influencing the decision to leave a college course and the process of leaving.

### 3.3 Focus Group Meeting

Students' Unions (SU) Branch Officers participated in a research focus group and workshop to explore their understanding and experience of college non-completion based on interaction with students in their respective institutions.

## 4. FINDINGS FROM THE PILOT PROJECT

This section details the profiles of five of those students who had decided to leave, and who participated in an individual interview. It also details experiential perspectives (section 4.2), from all those who completed the survey, in response to two questions, namely: *'advice they would give to a student considering leaving higher education'* and *'advice they would give to a student entering higher education'*.

### 4.1 Profile of Students' Experience of Leaving College

#### **Kate**

Kate was in her mid 50's when she returned to college following redundancy. She really enjoyed her course and was content in her studies. However, the reality for her was that she both wanted to and needed to be in employment. She needed to be working in order to meet her financial requirements and she was studying in order to assist in getting a new job. Therefore once the opportunity of employment came along, she felt she had no choice but to take it up and was not able to combine the demands of her course and her job. However, she would not advise a young person at the start of their career to compromise their studies by taking a job. Kate is therefore not typical of students who drop-out of college but reflects a cohort of students who attend college with the short-term goal of re-entering the workforce rather than seeking a long-term career.

#### **Jean**

Jean ( 22) obtained between 400 and 450 points in her Leaving Certificate and studied architecture which was her first choice on the CAO application. In advance of starting college she was not concerned about the course content or workload but was worried about adapting to an unfamiliar environment, being away from home (she had to live away from home) and money. She found the college experience challenging and neither the college life or course were as she expected. She had difficulties with the course workload and understanding the material presented in class. It had been easy to get involved in college activities, though it was not easy to get to know people or to make friends.

Having successfully completed first year she decided to leave following the failure of exams in second year. She cited the course workload, course content, the death of her father and illness as the main factors behind her decision. She found the process of review and critique of projects particularly challenging as it seemed that there was no appreciation shown for the effort put into projects by students and the process seemed critical rather than constructive. Consequently, she felt discouraged and started to question if she was good enough for the course. In addition the architecture building was not part of the main campus and students felt disjointed from the main campus.

Jean discussed her decision to leave college with friends/other students, parents and family. College staff seemed unapproachable following her experience in the project critique process. She contacted the college support services but did not find them very helpful. She was unaware of the services provided by the Students' Union. Based on her experience she felt that the support services for students considering leaving college were inadequate and did not meet the particular needs of students at that time. However, she was happy to have made the decision to leave college when she did.

### **Liam**

Liam (21) achieved between 300 - 350 points in his Leaving Certificate and studied health promotion which was his first choice. He was the first person in his immediate family to attend third level. While in college, he lived in student accommodation with his school friends. Prior to entering college, the only concern he had was about the financial demands of college. Liam really enjoyed his introduction to college life especially the freedom, however he soon realised that without supervision he had fallen behind in college work. The college year had moved so fast that he and other students were overcome with work before they realised it. It became difficult to manage his time, the college schedule and social activities. Specifically, he found free periods between lectures difficult to manage, these periods were either wasted or lectures missed, and he did not have a great record of attendance in class. When the pressures of college work caught up on him, he quickly lost interest in his course, lost the willpower to succeed and failed first year summer and repeat exams.

When he was considering leaving college, Liam discussed his decision with friends mainly. Although Liam was vaguely aware of the college support services available to him, he did not access any services in advance of leaving college. He discussed course material with lecturers but not the fact that he was contemplating leaving college. He did not make contact with the Students Union as he did not think they could play a role in sorting out his difficulties. On reflection, Liam acknowledged that he had enjoyed his first few months too much and did not place sufficient emphasis on his studies. However, he felt that that he could have been provided with more guidance on this by the college and taught how to engage in '*self-directed*' learning. In addition, he realised that he did not do enough research in advance of selecting his programme, and that picking the right programme is critical. He regretted not making the most of his college opportunity and although he intends to return to college in the future he is insecure about his likelihood of future success and also financial commitments for fees.

### **Aine**

Aine (20) studied Psychology having achieved between 400 and 450 points in her Leaving Certificate. Psychology was not only her first choice but her only choice for college – *'it was the course that she really wanted to study'*. She was concerned about the course content and workload in advance of starting college. Aine described herself as a great *'book learner'*, which she perfected during her second level education. However, when she got to third level, she found that her *'book learning'* approach was less effective and she found it very challenging to pursue *'free thought'* and explore her own views rather than *'regurgitating'* learned material. She found the course content, workload and experience very different to what she had expected and even though she attended her lectures, she struggled. Ultimately she felt that her choice of course was wrong as it involved a very different approach to learning. She blamed herself for not adequately assessing the demands of the course and not conducting adequate research in advance of selecting that course. However, she worked hard to try to succeed on the course and stuck with the course until the end of first year but failed her exams and repeats and decided at that stage to give up on the course.

Her primary reason for leaving was that the course content was not as expected and she also cited financial difficulties. She discussed her options with parents, friends and the college student advisor. She found the college supports helpful and informative but ultimately decided that the best decision for her was to leave that course. She now describes it as being the *'wrong course at the wrong time'* but she does not regret taking on the course or her decision to leave as it is part of a learning process. She is planning to return to college in the future but intends to be much more thorough in researching her options and cautious in her choice of course.

### **Steve**

Steve (25) had returned to college following his initial degree to pursue further studies in engineering. However he had become frustrated with both the course structure and the lack of support from college staff. He felt that the college staff did not show enough interest in students and simply wanted to deliver a course without taking account of the specific needs or feedback of students. He also said that students need to be clearly focused on what is right for them rather than just selecting a course or a college that fits in with what their friends are doing. When things started to go wrong for him on his course, he felt that the college did not provide adequate support to him and that the lecturers were not interested in discussing his situation.

Before he left his course, he discussed his decision with friends and other students. He made contact with college support services but did not find them very helpful and he did not make contact with the Students Union. Based on his experience he felt that overall services need to be more supportive to students who find themselves uncertain about their chosen course or facing problems with courses and contemplating their future in college.

## 4.2 Experiential Perspectives for Fellow Students

Respondents were invited to answer two key questions, in the guise of advice to fellow students: ‘*advice they would give to a student considering leaving higher education*’ and ‘*advice they would give to a student entering higher education*’. These are collated in Tables 1 and 2 below.

**Table 1: Experiential Perspectives for Others Considering Leaving Higher Education**

<b>Course Choice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If the course is not right for you, then leave and pursue something different</i></li> <li>• <i>If the course is not for you, then don't stay, find something that you like</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't suffer through a course that you dislike</i></li> <li>• <i>College education is important but there are other options</i></li> </ul>
<b>Seek Advice/ Guidance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Discuss your decision with family, friends and college staff</i></li> <li>• <i>Take everyone's advice on board before making a decision</i></li> <li>• <i>Talk to a lecturer and discuss your situation</i></li> <li>• <i>Talk to people and get their opinions</i></li> <li>• <i>Talk to others on the course</i></li> <li>• <i>If struggling with workload and grades, discuss with others on the course to see how they are managing; if you are having problems with lecturers, speak up; avail of all support services</i></li> <li>• <i>Look for help and support as early as possible</i></li> </ul>
<b>Making the Decision to Leave</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If decision made to leave, then do so as soon as possible</i></li> <li>• <i>Be absolutely sure about your decision</i></li> <li>• <i>Make sure you make your decision for the right reason</i></li> <li>• <i>Consider the reasons why you want to leave and examine if they can be addressed or help got from others</i></li> <li>• <i>Consider the impact of your decision</i></li> <li>• <i>If college or related problems are making you unwell, leave and get your health back</i></li> <li>• <i>Do what makes you happy</i></li> <li>• <i>Do what is best for you</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't leave unless you are really unhappy, persevere and you will get through it</i></li> <li>• <i>Give yourself time to make the right decision</i></li> <li>• <i>If at all possible, stay in college</i></li> <li>• <i>Have a back-up plan and think things through thoroughly</i></li> <li>• <i>If you can't cope, then stop and decide what is best for you</i></li> <li>• <i>Ensure that you explore all your options prior to leaving (can be expensive to return to college later)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Perception of Non-Completion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>There is no shame in leaving college, so do it if it is right for you</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't be afraid about disappointing others, do what is right for you</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't think of yourself as a failure because you want to leave college</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't worry about family, they will be happy to see you doing what is right for you</i></li> </ul>

**Table 2: Experiential Perspectives for Others Starting College**

Course Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Check course demands and timetables and figure out if you can also hold down a job</i></li> <li>• <i>Choose a course that you are really interested in, not the course recommended by others or the one with the best job prospects</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't do a course that other people think that you will like</i></li> <li>• <i>Unless you really love the course, don't do it</i></li> </ul>
Research The Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Talk to students on the course and get a grasp on the workload</i></li> <li>• <i>Talk to people who are already on the course, as CAO, open days and prospectus don't really give any idea of what is involved in a course</i></li> <li>• <i>Make sure to talk to a student who is already on the course and find out all the pros and cons of doing the course</i></li> <li>• <i>Do a lot of research on your course prior to entry</i></li> <li>• <i>Make sure that you have researched the course as much as possible</i></li> </ul>
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Attend all lectures</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't fall behind on lecture material and practical's (lab work)</i></li> <li>• <i>Go to all your classes, it makes such a difference</i></li> <li>• <i>Keep on top of the workload</i></li> <li>• <i>Do not get over-stressed by the workload</i></li> <li>• <i>Attend all classes because you can't get a feel for the course if you are never there</i></li> <li>• <i>First few weeks are important, make sure to have a good attendance</i></li> <li>• <i>Try to get a rapport going with lecturers</i></li> <li>• <i>Ask lecturers plenty of questions</i></li> <li>• <i>Study from beginning and don't put off asking for help</i></li> <li>• <i>Get work done as soon as possible and ask lecturers for tips on writing assignments</i></li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Be outgoing and make friends within your own course</i></li> <li>• <i>Try your best to make plenty of friends</i></li> <li>• <i>Try to make friends – it makes the world of difference</i></li> <li>• <i>Make friends, join clubs and attend lectures</i></li> <li>• <i>The first few weeks/months are extremely important to get settled in and meet new people</i></li> </ul>
College Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If college does not turn out the way that you expected, talk to someone about it</i></li> <li>• <i>Sometimes university is not for everyone, it can be scary going into a lecture hall of 400-500 people for the first time</i></li> <li>• <i>You might feel more comfortable in an Institute of Education as it is smaller, more personal and can be more beneficial to you rather than feeling insignificant in a large room of people</i></li> <li>• <i>Everyone feels uncertain about what they're studying in first year</i></li> <li>• <i>College is not what you think it will be</i></li> <li>• <i>Not everything is going to be what you expect – some things will be a lot better and others will be worse</i></li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If you don't like your course at the end of Year 1, don't waste further time on it</i></li> <li>• <i>Make sure that you are emotionally ready for college – don't go just because everyone else is going to college</i></li> <li>• <i>Make the most of it, it will be the best years of your life; work hard and you can play hard</i></li> </ul>
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### **4.3 Summary Issues Arising Overall from the Pilot Project**

The following summary section details briefly the key themes arising from the analysis of all survey responses and the contributions of USI Student Officers.

#### General Themes from the Survey

The following themes arise from analysis of all survey responses and many of these resonate with findings in the international research literature as well as emerging issues from other National Forum funded projects.

#### **Prior Concerns**

Many students appeared to have had concerns prior to starting college primarily relating to money, course workload and adapting to an unfamiliar environment. Those students who had started to think about leaving college in the first 12 weeks were more likely to have had worries prior to entering college.

#### **College Experience**

Students who had left college tended to find it difficult to manage the course workload and their college experience was not what they had expected. Course content not being as expected was a significant trigger for dissatisfaction for those who considered leaving early in their first year<sup>3 4</sup>. Over one third of students had unexpected family, medical or personal issues which impacted on their time at college. The main issues included bereavement, personal illness, mental health problems and illness of a family member.

#### **Factors Influencing Decision to Leave**

Overall, the most important factors which influenced the decision to leave college included: stress; course content not as expected; financial difficulties; and course workload too high. The experience of transition friends appeared to place additional pressures on students which included: adjusting to a new college, a different course, a new approach of self-directed learning and a new network of colleagues/. Some students appeared unable to

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<sup>3</sup> On ICT programmes, subject specific difficulties can arise where students do not understand the importance of, or have adequate skills for programming and maths (National Forum, 2015, Briefing Paper 1)

<sup>4</sup> This resonates with international research such as Yorke & Longden (2008), as well as Irish HE research Gibney et al (2011)

cope with the adjustment process which impacted on their studies and ultimately on their decision to stay in college or to leave<sup>5</sup>.

### **Discussion on the Decision to Leave College**

The majority of students discussed their decision to leave college with their parents and friends/other students. A lesser proportion discussed their decision with college staff and Students Union officers. Younger students and females appeared most likely to discuss their decision with parents. The majority of students agreed that their decision to leave their course was right for them at the time<sup>6</sup>.

### **Interaction with Support Services**

The main reasons for not making contact with college and/or Students Union support services included: a lack of awareness of how to contact these services; not feeling comfortable with discussing the issue; not thinking that services could help; and not thinking they needed help<sup>7</sup>.

## **4.4 Students Union Officers Perspectives**

Students Union Officers groups identified the following issues which are additional to those cited above from the survey:

- i. While the decision to 'drop-out' of college can be triggered by one factor or issue, it is usually the culmination of a number of factors including: illness; mental health/stress; failing exams; financial pressures; difficult living arrangements; living away from home; and difficulty of combining college with employment.
- ii. January (pre or post exams) appears to be a peak period for 'drop-out'. Panic sets in for students and they start to realise they may have not been working as hard as they should or that they are finding the course too difficult. In addition to the exam pressure, others come under pressure at the time of fee payment deadlines, project submission dates or continuous assessment deadlines.
- iii. For some students there may be no other factor involved in their decision to leave college than the fact that they realised that the course is not for them or they don't connect with the course, college or fellow students.
- iv. There is a high level of variance in terms of cooperation and communication between college staff/services and Students Unions. There are a range of initiatives (both small and large scale) are delivered by Students Unions and institutions (individually and collectively) to address non-completion each year.

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<sup>5</sup> This finding was also reported in another National Forum Research Project:: Denny, E et al (2015) *Transitions from Second Level and Further Education of Higher Education*, <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Research-Report-6-Transitions-from-Second-Level-FE-to-Higher-Education1911.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See Quinn & Moore-Cherry (2015: 9&64)

<sup>7</sup> Tinto (2006) a long-term researcher on student retention and completion argues that strategies for supporting students need to adopt a whole institution view so that they are well-integrated to support student success.

## 5. SUMMARY

Themes arising from this research resonate with the wider research findings nationally in Ireland through the National Forum 2014/15 Research Projects, and internationally with the work of Tinto (1997; 2000; 2006) and Yorke and Longden (2008). The particular value of this research project is its provision of an access point to understand the lived experience of students deciding to leave college. As noted by Quinn and Moore-Cherry (2015), the process of leaving is often a silent one, which may be characterised by a series of decisions and factors culminating in withdrawal from higher education. Developing a deeper understanding of the features of these experiences, complements Irish research to date and also offers an opportunity to identify how existing academic practices and supports available to students entering higher education might be extended and enhanced.

This research is likely to be of interest to higher education institutions and student groups whose approaches are concerned with supporting students to be successful in higher education.

## 6. NEXT STEPS

Following review of the pilot project methodology, the online questionnaire has been revised to focus more specifically on: the particular factors which were influential in terms of students' experiences of higher education, their decision to leave and the detailing of each students' individual story and experience. The methodology for accessing research participants will continue through social media outlets at local level within institutions, and a further refinement will be the issue and access to the online survey at three different points during the academic cycle. These access points will be November (for students who left by 31<sup>st</sup> October), February (for students who left by end of January) and April/May (for students who left after the end of January). Analysis will seek to determine what qualitative differences, if any, emerge for students according to the point in the academic year by which they left higher education. Finally, the facility for in-depth interview will also be available for students who wish to tell more about their experiences.

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