

Enhancing Teaching & Learning Focus on: Engagement in the First Year

Research¹ tells us there are key indicators which can help us determine at-risk groups of students in terms of early attrition from higher education. Research also tells us of the key fears of students entering into higher education, such as time management, belonging and the expectations of 3rd level. Synthesising the findings from the existing research from Ireland and internationally, helps us build a picture of the student experience and how we can better support students in their transition into and through higher education, especially their first year.

Why focus on first year?

A substantial proportion of retention issues can be attributed to key transition points into, through and out of higher education. One of the most important transitional stages, in terms of engaging students is the first two to six weeks of the first semester of the first year².

Research and supports in the areas of learning analytics to identify at risk students has intensified nationally during recent years³, but many of these tools need to collate data over a number of weeks to reveal patterns of engagement, by which time, for some students it may be too late.

There are also steps which can be taken in advance of entry to higher education, in schools, and in the weeks before admission, but these can be outside the control of curricular teams.

Why do students leave?

Researching the fears students have in the early stages of higher education, Yorke & Longden⁴ identified

- Lack of prior knowledge of higher education (experiences of family or friends)
- Financial worries
- Fear of isolation or loneliness

all of which can have implications for retention. Surveying students who exited early, among the reasons cited were

- "poor choice of programme;
- lack of personal commitment to study;

¹ Krause, K.-L. and Armitage, L. (2014) [Australian student engagement, belonging, retention and success: a synthesis of the literature](#), Higher Education Academy

² Levitz, R. & Noel, L. (1990). *Connecting students to institutions: Keys to retention and success*. In Upcraft, M.L. & Gardner J.N. (Eds.), *The freshman year experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college* (pp. 65-81). San Francisco & Oxford: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

³ see Crannóg podcast and supporting resources: [Supporting Student Success](#)

⁴ Yorke & Longden (2008) [The first-year experience of higher education in the UK](#). Final Report, Higher Education Academy

- teaching quality;
- lack of contact with academic staff;
- inadequate academic progress;
- and finance"

with results indicating that contact with academic staff was now more significant than in similar studies undertaken 10 years previously. The earliest leavers cited accommodation problems, making friends and lack of support from fellow students as the main reasons for leaving.

In 2015 the National Forumⁱ published a comprehensive report⁵ on transitioning into HE from 2nd level and further education in Ireland. The report includes a high-level literature review, and results of surveys from 1580 students and ten focus groups across 4 institutions. Of note, are the main challenges outlined by students transitioning into HE (supported by the international literature), and the supports suggested by students that would better help with the transition into higher education. Students reported transitioning into higher education takes at least a few weeks and for some over a semester. The data also revealed a correlation between the length of transition challenges and academic grades, with challenges of time management having the most significant negative impact on grades.

Among the challenges identified are:

- Time management (longest to overcome)
- Writing, critical assessment and independent research
- Social integration (2nd longest to overcome)
- Group work
- Unrealistic expectations of 3rd level

Potential Higher Education supports suggested by students included:

- Introductions to note taking, time management, study skills, essays, grading
- HE student mentors
- Course Specific Orientation

Qualitative analysis of responses, suggested that while most or all HE institutions provide note taking, study skills, and other supports, students either were not aware, did not attend or did not find them useful. Students at this transitional stage (full of free choices) need these sessions to either be mandatory or have incentives to attend. Many authors, and supported by the survey data, suggest that much of these supports need to take place **within the disciplines**, as part of the introductory curriculum. Students find it difficult to navigate the more generic skills supports, and the skills are often introduced too early in the Semester, before they actually need to apply them. Authors advocate viewing induction, not just as an event, but as a process. Some HEIs have implemented a more gradual induction process spanning 6 to 7 weeks. However, it is important to avoid a bolt-on approach with such inductions. Study skills, essay writing and other such supports are best introduced via the curriculum as opposed to generic first-year non-discipline specific skills.

⁵ National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education report on [Transition from Second Level and Further Education to Higher Education](#), 2015. Research report lead by Eleanor Denny, Trinity College Dublin

Leading in Curricular Approaches to Supporting First Year Transitions

The ideal approach to supporting transition into education, is a coordinated approach across all areas of relevant administration and academic departments⁶. This, of course, requires leadership from senior management. There are also measures that can be implemented within the curriculum and led by those in leadership roles.

Concluding their aforementioned report, Yorke & Longden⁴ suggest enhancements that could alleviate the fears or challenges encountered by early stage students. We refer here to those within in the teaching and learning space, such as

- early engagement of students
 - modes of teaching that quickly engage students in academic work
 - formative feedback from an early stage (introducing the expectations and standards of 3rd level)
- an appreciation within the institution that 1st year is critically important for student success, followed by
 - allocation of resources to reflect the importance of first year (as opposed to later years, when students should be capable of and demonstrating more independent learning)
 - teaching approaches which focus on student development within the discipline
 - ways of facilitating students forming peer networks
 - allocating those staff with a strong commitment to student learning to first year classes

Suggestions from the National Forum report⁵ for ways to manage more course specific orientation, include using the early weeks' tutorials, or laboratory times, which are often timetabled but do not actually commence until weeks 2 or 3. Also, based on the success of student-led peer mentoring schemes, students from later years of the course have been suggested as ideal facilitators of course/discipline specific orientation sessions.

Other suggestions for enhancing transitions via the disciplines include:

Early stage challenges	Suggested curricular enhancements
Generic induction, information overload	Consider course specific induction (during as yet unutilized timetabled labs, tutorials or seminars)
Unrealistic expectations of 3 rd level (course specific)	Course specific welcome packs Early formative (low stakes, with feedback) assessments
Social integration	Opportunities within the curriculum to meet with and talk to other students; Ice-breaker sessions during as yet unused timetabled sessions; Group work within classes
Lack of contact with academic staff	Reconsider staff allocation in the early years, building towards more independent learning in later years
Engagement	Introducing students early to the real-world applications of their chosen field, via student as partner initiatives, students as researchers, or project and group work;

⁶ Kift, S., Nelson, K. & Clarke, J. (2010). *Transition Pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1-20.

	Presentations from final year or Masters students on their academic journey, project outputs and their next steps
Sense of belonging	Early engagement in academic life, coursework and seeing real world applications; Group and project work
Non-engagement in induction activities	Embedding induction within the disciplines gives it more credibility and relevance and reduces the perception of it being an optional add-on.
Time management	Programme-level oversight of assessment, ensuring well-paced, regular formative assessment Transparent course outlines, including assessment dates, criteria, marking rubrics, etc.

Further Reading

Rebecca Turner, David Morrison, Debby Cotton, Samantha Child, Sebastian Stevens, Patricia Nash & Pauline Kneale (2017) Easing the transition of first year undergraduates through an immersive induction module, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22:7, 805-821, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2017.1301906

Ryan Naylor, Chi Baik & Sophia Arkoudis (2018) Identifying attrition risk based on the first year experience, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37:2, 328-342, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2017.1370438

Kift, S., Nelson, K. & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition Pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1-20.

Improving the Student Experience in Higher Education: Support and Advice for Staff:
<http://www.improvingthestudentexperience.com/>

Linked Resources

Please see the Crannóg website for other resources that elaborate on some of the solutions and interventions outlined above: www.crannog-he.ie