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# Student Success:

# Barriers and Facilitators

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## National Seminar Report

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Report by Caroline Forsyth and Mike Wride

## Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 5
INTRODUCTION ..... 8
BACKGROUND ..... 8
RECRUITMENT PROCESS ..... 9
FORMAT OF SEMINAR ..... 9
KEYNOTE ADDRESSES ..... 10
FINDINGS ..... 11
SUCCESS ..... 11
Academic success: ..... 11
Personal success: ..... 11
Social Success: ..... 12
FACILITATORS OF SUCCESS ..... 13
Supports: ..... 13
College activities: ..... 13
Flexible curriculum/pathways: ..... 13
Placements and internships/study abroad: ..... 14
Online learning spaces: ..... 14
Inner drive and motivation: ..... 14
Reflection and evaluation: ..... 15
Flexible assessment: ..... 15
Self-assessment: ..... 15
Peer assessment/feedback: ..... 15
Feedback: ..... 15
BARRIERS TO SUCCESS ..... 16
Perceptions of worthiness: ..... 16
Transition from second level education: ..... 16
Self-doubt: ..... 17
Language: ..... 17
Physical learning spaces: ..... 17
CONCLUSION ..... 18
RECOMMENDATIONS: ..... 20
Appendices ..... 22

Appendix i - Programme of seminar - Learning from Student Success: Barriers and Facilitators ..... 22

Appendix ii –Thematic analysis based on initial written submissions from students..... 23

Appendix ii –Thematic analyses from seminar workshop discussion ..... 24

## Table of Figures

Figure 1 Themes identified from the written submissions of 24 students from 5 universities, prior to the seminar ..... 23
Figure 2 Facilitators of Academic Student Success from seminar workshop discussion..... 24
Figure 3 Barriers to Academic Student Success from seminar workshop discussion..... 25
Figure 4 Facilitators of Personal Student Success from seminar workshop discussion..... 26
Figure 5 Barriers to Personal Student Success from seminar workshop discussion..... 27
Figure 6 Facilitators of Social Student Success from seminar workshop discussion ..... 28
Figure 7 Barriers to Social Student Success from seminar workshop discussion ..... 29

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report discusses the views of final year students and recent graduates who attended a TCD led, multi-institutional one-day workshop on what student success means to them, and what they identified as the facilitators of and barriers to achieving that success.

The findings were based on the analysis of four types of inputs for the seminar: written submissions by students on the theme prior to the seminar and student talks, panel discussion and workshop discussions on the day of the seminar.

Student success is a broad concept. It is different for and personal to each student and changes with the student's journey from initial entry to college through to graduation. In order to have a framework to discuss the concept at the seminar, a thematic analysis was done of the written submissions which students submitted prior to the seminar.

**Three broad categories of success identified from the written submissions:**

The three main categories of success identified by students were academic, personal and social. While initially academic success features predominantly, as students progress through their studies, they develop a more holistic perspective where personal and social success become increasingly important to them.

These categories and sub-categories are listed below.

| **Academic** | **Personal** | **Social** |
|---|---|---|
| College work | Having goals | Interpersonal skills |
| Career satisfaction | Being engaged | Friendships |
| Academic growth | Developing a broader worldview | Extracurricular activities |
| Academic achievement | Overcoming barriers | Helping others |
| Professional opportunities | Personal growth/journey | Involvement in community |

**Facilitators of and Barriers to Student Success:**

The facilitators and barriers outlined were identified through analysis of the written submissions and of the seminar talks and workshops.

| **FACILITATORS** | |
|---|---|
| **College supports** | Formal college services such as student learning services, counselling services, disability services, access services, career services, peer mentoring and academic teaching and learning services provide some of the formal networks which help students become successful. |
| **Other supports networks** | Family, friends, peers, lecturers also form an integral part of the supports that students rely on as they progress through college. |
| **Extra-curricular activities** | Student unions, societies, mentoring programmes, volunteering programmes, Erasmus programmes etc. allow students to develop a range of interpersonal and |

| | |
|---|---|
| | transferrable skills, networks, friendships and experiences outside of their normal academic studies. These are important for their own personal development and for future career prospects. |
| **Inner resources** | Motivation, perseverance, self-belief, self-efficacy, empowerment are important inner resources in helping students to overcome the difficulties they face. They can be the difference between staying in and dropping out of college. Helping students to develop these resources is therefore important and worth investing in. |

| **BARRIERS** | |
|---|---|
| **Perception** | That college is not for them; that it is for 'other' people who are richer, smarter etc. |
| **Self-doubt** | On encountering a new academic environment that requires a new set of skills. The role of student support services was mentioned as being helpful in overcoming these difficulties. |
| **Language difficulties** | For students whose first language is not English. |
| **Academic English** | More difficult to understand than normal conversational English even for native English speakers. |
| **Mental health** | A barrier for some students, some of which resulted from adverse circumstances faced by students in college and some were pre-existing conditions that students have before starting college. |
| **Student spaces** | Lack of spaces where students can collaborate or share as a way of facilitating peer learning. |
| **Feedback** | Inconsistent or generic feedback on academic assignments which does not facilitate improvement for the student. |
| **Teaching ability** | Some lecturers have a research-based background and may have little or no training or experience in teaching and learning strategies. |
| **Other barriers** | Include financial issues, accommodation problems and interpersonal/relationship problems that occur generally in life and can have a significant negative effect on student success. |

**Recommendations:**

Whilst the focus of the seminar was on the student view of student success and what facilitates or hinders that and not on recommendations, some recommendations did emerge naturally as a result of the opinions expressed by the student participants.

- College support services (Student Learning, Disability, Counselling, Peer Mentoring, Access, Careers) be developed to cater to the growing number of students each year. As they provide both support when problems arise and help prevent issues arising, strengthening these services in colleges will not only increase student success but will increase student retention which will ultimately be reflected in improved college statistics.
- Harness graduates from those demographics which are underrepresented at third level to be ambassadors in their areas, to talk to school children at secondary and perhaps even primary level to show them that college can be an option for them.
- Develop more extensive English language support services for students who are not native English language speakers.
- Provide increased physical student learning spaces to enable students to learn with and from each other.
- Centres for Teaching & Learning that support academic staff need to be expanded to all lecturing staff so that they can be more effective in teaching students.
- Feedback on assignments should be specific, unambiguous and provide the student with information on how they can improve their knowledge, critical thinking and writing.
- There should be diversity in how students are assessed e.g. a range of formats of continuous assessments as well as summative assessments.
- Flexibility around electives was suggested for final year students to enable them to tailor their study to their individual requirements.
- Students should have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities such as student societies, sports, student union activities that promote personal and social development and that help develop life-long and career-enhancing skills such as negotiation skills, team work skills, management skills etc.
- A model of how extracurricular activities map to professional development would be useful in helping students see their wider potential.
- Incorporation of practical aspects, such as internships, to courses as a way of helping students learn real-life as opposed to theoretical skills, which would help them be more successful after they graduate.
- Peer mentoring by alumni could be developed through the careers or alumni services which would facilitate students feeling more confident going into a work environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Hearing the 'student voice' is a vital when developing services in higher education, but that voice only becomes effective if it is listened to and students are engaged in partnership in planning and decision-making at all levels so that they can have a direct impact on the design of their education.

While institutes focus on metrics, statistics and rankings as ways to define institutional success, underlying these figures are individuals who are not just numbers, but people with complex lives who are part of wider networks. Most if not all students will face difficulties and obstacles during their studies. Some will even drop out of college as a result. However, with the right supports, more students can be successful and this in turn will enhance the institutions' success ratings. It is therefore, in the institutions' interest to take heed of the facilitators and barriers around student success and to ensure that resources are provided to support students to successfully complete their studies.

Higher Education Institutions should be further interested in hearing the student voice in discussing student success, because one of the high-level targets of the Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018-20 is for "*All HEIs will have a Student Success Strategy in place by 2020 which will embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies*" (p.15). The Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021 further states "*The HEA will monitor progress as part of the Strategic Dialogue process, and ensure that the goals, objectives, and targets of the NAP are included in the compacts agreed between the HEA and each higher education institution*" (p.12).

Allen and Nichols' assertion that 'Student voice is integral to genuinely hear from the student population their recommendations for change as producers of their own success', (2017) was the guiding principle for the Trinity College Dublin (TCD) led seminar on student success which was held on February 21st, 2019.

This report will discuss the student views expressed during the seminar, how student success was defined and what students identified as the barriers to and facilitators of student success. Whilst the aims of the seminar did not include suggestions for improving the facilitators or decreasing the barriers, where these did emerge, they are included in the report.

## BACKGROUND

In 2018, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFTL) opened a call for grants under theme 'Supporting Student Success in and through Higher Education'. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) submitted an application and was awarded a grant to host a seminar titled 'Supporting Student Success: Barriers and Facilitators'.

As mentioned earlier, the student voice was considered a key aspect in discussing student success and what facilitates or hinders it. It was therefore decided that students' views would feature foremost in this seminar and form the main component of the findings.

While TCD was the lead on the seminar, it was recognised that knowledge generated through Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) working together is a stronger representation of the sector in Ireland as a whole, than that generated by one institute. It was therefore decided to invite other HEIs to collaborate on the seminar. Dublin City University (DCU), Maynooth University (MU), University College Cork (UCC) and University of Limerick (UL) were invited and agreed to take part.

## RECRUITMENT PROCESS

In November 2018, email requests were sent by student learning support services in five universities (TCD, DCU, MU, UCC, UL) to their respective undergraduate students seeking written submissions on the topic of student success. Students could submit their responses in any format that they felt represented their views of success, such as via text, poems, blogs, photos, email, or an online form. Twenty-four written submissions were received which were subsequently analysed by an Education Psychology doctoral student from University College Dublin (UCD), on placement in Student Learning Development (SLD), TCD. The main categories around student success arising from the submissions were used as a framework for the workshop portion of the seminar. The three main categories were 'Academic Success', Personal Success' and Social Success' (Figure 1 p.23). These were further divided into sub-themes (Figures 2-7 pgs.24-29). These will be discussed in more detail in the findings section.

Students could also additionally choose to give a talk, participate in a discussion panel, participate in the workshop or attend the seminar. Each institution was equally represented at the seminar and there was diversity of representation regarding age, gender and ethnicity. Students from different socio-economic backgrounds, rural/urban backgrounds and from a variety of family units were also represented, though this only became apparent during the seminar when students talked about their backgrounds.

On the day of the seminar seven students gave talks about their individual experiences of student success and five students participated in a panel discussion on the topic. Some, but not all of these students had also contributed to the written submissions.

## FORMAT OF SEMINAR

The programme for the seminar is included in Appendix i.

Mike Wride, Academic Developer with CAPSL introduced the keynote speakers: Cat O'Driscoll, Coordinator NStEP (National Student Engagement Programme) and Oisín Hasan, Deputy President / Vice President for Academic Affairs, USI (The Union of Students in Ireland).

After the keynote addresses, six final-year students and recently graduated alumni from TDC, DCU, UCC and MU gave talks on their views of student success. During the coffee break, attendees were able to view the written submission on student success which students from 5 universities had submitted prior to the seminar. These were posted on poster boards at the side of the room. A panel discussion consisting of 5 students which discussed topics around student success took place after coffee and finally, after lunch, a

workshop for all attendees, was held to discuss the barriers to and facilitators of student success, using the themes from the written submissions as a framework for the discussions.

Attendees at the event included students and staff from participating universities. Staff came from student learning support services, disability services, careers services, access services and academic departments.

## KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

The keynote addresses set the background for the seminar by discussing the historical context of the development of student engagement and student partnership in higher education.

Oisín Hassan talked about the path of student engagement from its origins in the 60s and 70s when USI began developing principles around the rights of students and promoting the student voice in higher education and its inclusion on HEI bodies. Today that has evolved to the level where USI representatives sit on national level boards such as the NFTL board. Oisín mentioned the importance of student engagement at all levels e.g. programme, institutional level so that the capacity of students to be partners in their education is developed throughout the higher education system. Oisín also discussed the HEA goal that all publicly funded HEIs will have a Student Success Strategy in place by 2020 and that the NFTL's student success strategy aims to create guidelines to help institutions develop these Student Success Strategies. The message that Oisín wanted to stress was that everything an institution does, should have 'student success' as its outcome.

Cat O'Driscoll introduced Trowler and Trowler's (2011) definition of student engagement *'The investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution'* to discuss student engagement in higher education, its impact and why it is important. She talked about the HEA's formation of a representative group in 2014 which explored student engagement and developed ten principles of how student engagement can be embedded in an institution (HEA Report 2016).

NStep, a collaboration between the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and USI was subsequently formed in 2016 as a way of taking these principles from theory to implementation. Its aims include developing student capabilities in engaging with institutions, supporting institutions to facilitate student engagement through training and resource development. NStep also has a National Student Engagement Network which creates a space for public and private HEIs to discuss student engagement with both staff and students.

Although it is important to hear the student voice, the level of partnership students have in an institution can determine the impact that voice can have on decision-making. Cat introduced the Arnstein (1969) model of participation where at the lowest level of participation, people have little say in decision-making while at the highest level, people have full control over decision-making. One of the higher levels of participation is

‘partnership’ where structures are jointly owned by all parties and all parties are able to share in planning. While student involvement in higher levels of partnership in an institution is preferred, Cat recommended using the existing model of partnership that exists within an individual institution and building on that to increase the level of partnership overall. The upcoming Student Success Strategy that all publicly funded HEIs are obliged to develop by 2020 would be an ideal opportunity to test and develop these partnership levels of engagement between students and the institutions or to introduce them where they are not currently in place.

This seminar on Student Success could be perceived as a first step in this process.

## FINDINGS

The findings were based on the analysis of four types of inputs for the seminar: written submissions, student talks, panel discussion and workshop discussions. As expected, academic success was one of the main categories under which success was discussed. However, two other main categories also emerged: personal success and social success. In addition, several barriers and facilitators to student success, were also identified.

The main findings are discussed below under the headings of ‘success’, ‘facilitators’ and ‘barriers’.

## SUCCESS

Academic success: Academic success was what students initially wanted when they joined college and was discussed in terms of attainment of degrees, career progression, professional development and acquisition of knowledge.

However, where students had doubts about their ability to complete a degree, getting into second year was the main goal. Whilst, at times, the students’ focus shifted to dealing with challenges such as family or financial matters, ultimately students did want to achieve the best grade they could and when necessary they refocussed to concentrate on their studies. Apart from attaining a degree, academic success also included the feeling of satisfaction in being knowledgeable in a chosen field and being able to converse confidently in it. The feeling of achievement in having studied successfully to acquire that level of knowledge was an important factor in feeling academically successful.

Personal success: Whilst getting a degree was the initial goal of students on entering college, as they progressed through their studies and became more aware of the other opportunities that were available to them, the degree became just one of their goals. Opportunities to get involved in wider college community through activities such as the Students’ Union, peer mentoring, extracurricular activities, and volunteering allowed students to develop personally and develop abilities and strengths outside of the academic domain.

Obstacles or challenges encountered by students, despite being a barrier to success, became a marker of success once they had been overcome. Challenges included mental health issues, disability, financial problems, self-doubt, difficulties with course-work,

study/work/family balance etc. Overcoming obstacles, persevering in the face of adversity and continuing their studies year on year, increased students' feelings of self-confidence and were viewed as a form of success.

Self-discovery and self-acceptance were also mentioned as important aspects of personal growth. Students found that they became more aware of their own skills, characteristics and values and become more comfortable with themselves, through self-reflection and evaluation. They developed as independent learners and made their own choices regarding their education.

One student talked about finally accepting himself as an introvert and realising that it was not necessary to be extroverted or the loudest in the group to be effective and successful. Being true to one's values was regarded as an important element in being happy and successful. Against a background of family expectations of high academic performance one student initially attended university out of a sense of duty and expectation but with self-discovery and personal development, felt empowered to be able to make his own decisions and choices.

Social Success: Extracurricular activities allowed students to develop their relationship skills as well as make friends and develop networks which they would take with them when they left university. By participating in activities outside of their academic studies, students were also able to broaden their worldview through interactions with others of different backgrounds, beliefs, experiences and ages.

Making a difference and giving back to others were ideas discussed by students who felt they had benefited from their university experience and wanted to be able to share that with others. Students from non-traditional university backgrounds felt they wanted to inspire, by their example, their families and those from similar backgrounds to feel that university could be an option for them.

One mature student attended university after acquiring a brain injury. She was the first in her family to go to university and said it was because of the support she got from the Disability Service and other support services in college that she was not only able to do an undergraduate degree but also progressed to complete a master's degree. She said that at her graduation, her son pointed out that the only other time he had seen a degree was on the wall of the family doctor's surgery. Getting her degrees meant a lot, not only from her own educational and achievement perspective, but because she was also paving the way for future generations to attend university. Another mature student similarly spoke about how successfully graduating university after dropping out of 2nd level when he was younger, now made it easier for his children to believe they could attend university if they wished.

Other students from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' talked about how they wanted to encourage students from similar backgrounds such as single-parent families or foster care homes, to believe that they could aspire to attend university too. One student talked about inspiring a group of young local people to attend university. They believed that 'people like us don't come to university' but because he was from a similar background, they could

identify with him and so see that university might also be an option for them. That 'making a difference' was an important aspect of success for several students.

## FACILITATORS OF SUCCESS

Supports: Students mentioned support services and networks as being an important aspect in helping them to be successful. As one student said 'success doesn't happen in a vacuum', and students need to have a support network, especially when they are facing challenges. Support came from friends, peers, lecturers, family, and through the formal college services such as learning support services, disability services, counselling services, careers services, library, tutors, peer mentoring etc. As supports are regarded as a vital aspect of student success, students who are away from their normal support circles and cannot access them as easily when they need to, such as international students, may be in greater need of the formal college services and it is important therefore that these are adequate to meet those needs.

College activities: Students talked about the role extracurricular college activities play in student success. Students felt it was important to be part of a wider college community and to participate in college societies, sports clubs, the Students' Union, volunteering, peer mentoring, other mentoring programmes and extra-curricular activities. These activities gave students the chance to develop friendships and networks, learn useful graduate skills, give something back, help others and helped personal development. These activities also gave students a chance to meet people from different disciplines, ages and walks of life which helped broaden their world view and were viewed as an enriching the student experience. Students also found that joining these activities provided them with networks and a form of support when challenges arose during their studies.

Whilst engaging in these activities was seen in a very positive light and a facilitator of personal and social success, they could sometimes become a barrier to academic success if students focussed too much on them and too little on their academic studies. Students spoke about trying to find the balance, sometimes getting it wrong and not doing as well as they would have liked in their studies. However, this generally occurred in first year and students learned how to manage their time better each year so in that regard, it was also a valuable learning experience in self-management.

Whilst extracurricular activities were viewed as useful for developing social and personal skills, because they are not formalised in any way, they were felt to lack a direct connection with developing professional skills. A model of how they map to professional development could therefore be a way to make them more useful.

Flexible curriculum/pathways: A flexible curriculum was discussed as a way for students to tailor their education more to their desired outcomes or professions. Flexibility around electives was suggested for final year students rather than for first and second year students as students in the earlier years require a broader base of knowledge from which to make later choices. However, in the final year/s students would like to have more choice in what

they study towards their final degree, so that they could direct it more specifically to their desired professions.

Placements and internships/study abroad: Several students mentioned the incorporation of practical aspects, such as internships, to their course as a way of helping them learn real-life as opposed to theoretical skills, which would help them be more successful after they graduate. Paid placements/internships are a way of enabling students to work in an area aligned with their studies, gain employability skills while also having a measure of financial independence which could perhaps lessen the burden on parents or might mean students who work to fund their studies might not have to work part-time jobs. One student mentioned this financial independence as being more difficult for foreign students who rely on their parents or home governments for funding of their university fees, accommodation and associated costs.

Studying abroad as part of an Erasmus programme gave students the opportunity to broaden their horizons and perspectives. Two students found that the experience was very rewarding in terms of how they could make positive changes in their home university based on ideas they had gained abroad and in how it helped them develop personally in confidence, relationship building as well as in terms of knowledge.

Peer mentoring by students who had already completed internships, was seen as an advantage when it came to helping students prepare to go on internships/placements. Students felt that a system of peer mentoring could be developed through the careers or alumni services which would facilitate students feeling more confident going into a work environment.

While internships and placements were generally perceived as positive there was some criticism regarding the lack of structure in some, where supervision was inadequate or learning objectives were not clear.

Online learning spaces: Online learning spaces are important facilitators for learning because they are open to students who are off-campus or working or cannot otherwise access the 9-5 college services. These spaces can be hosted or facilitated by support services as a way of providing information and resources. But also, as part of peer-learning, students need to be able to connect with each other to discuss/collaborate on projects, issues etc. so setting up their own online groups in Google Hangouts for instance can be helpful.

Inner drive and motivation: All students mentioned obstacles and challenges they faced as they progressed through their studies and several mentioned that having determination and inner-drive was an asset in overcoming these. While they also acknowledged the place that external supports had in helping them deal with challenges, they felt that their own internal resources played a key part in being able to persevere in the face of adversity. They mentioned that a significant proportion of their peers had dropped-out along the student journey and some of them too had considered it at different stages. Their determination to succeed helped them persevere and ultimately succeed. Oisín Hassan, stated that the drop-out rate for first years is approximately 15% but that if the number of those who had

thought about dropping-out was included, the percentage could increase to approximately 30% so helping students to develop their resilience could be an important part in student retention and ultimately student success.

Reflection and evaluation: Reflecting and evaluating on past performance and what they had learned, helped by getting appropriate feedback on assignments, was a valuable tool in being successful. Students talked about reflecting on skills and knowledge and how that would help them in their life after college. Reflecting on who they are as people, their values, strengths and weaknesses and how they accepted and appreciated those aspects of themselves was seen as equally important. Where reflection was incorporated into the learning experience, students felt they learned a lot more about how they could develop better in those areas.

Flexible assessment: Flexible assessment opportunities were seen by all students as a positive factor in getting good grades. Students said that the annual exam-based assessment of learning system was one dimensional and did not take into account the different ways that students learn and express themselves. While some students do well under exam conditions others do not and their grades may not accurately reflect their knowledge. It was also mentioned that continuous assessment assignments allow for a greater in-depth immersion and fuller engagement in a topic and students mentioned having a much greater and longer lasting knowledge of an assignment they had worked on over several weeks, as opposed to an exam they had revised for over a much shorter period.

Self-assessment: One student talked about the value of self-assessment and self-reflection as a tool for learning. His course used this type of assessment from first year onwards and he found that these strategies helped him develop a much greater awareness of his own knowledge and abilities.

Peer assessment/feedback: One student who had some experience of peer feedback on an informal, student-led level, said that the students bounced ideas off each other and helped each other develop ideas. It worked for their class as they were a co-operative group but for other groups who were competitive, it would probably not work. None of the students had experience of formal, organised peer-assessment/review.

Timing of assessment especially regarding summative assessment, was an important consideration regarding academic success. Semesterisation was seen as both potentially positive and negative. Semesterisation could be a facilitator of academic success as it enabled students to be examined on a smaller portion of the course once it had been completed and allowed students to focus more fully on the next portion of the course. On the negative side, it was felt that there was little time to learn a topic and reflect on what had been learned, before it was examined.

Feedback: Timely, appropriate, targeted feedback was a factor in how well students learned from their assignments and could therefore be used to improve their assignment writing. Students talked about the difference between getting useful, constructive feedback which gave them steps in how to improve their assignments as opposed to generic,

sometimes 'cut and paste' feedback given to students with similar grades, which was unhelpful and often unclear to students as to what they had done wrong or could do to improve. Terms such as 'needs to be more critical' were deemed unhelpful as students did not know what they should do to be more critical.

Where lecturers were willing to meet students, it was often only with students who had failed, so the students who had passed did not have the opportunity to discuss their results with the lecturer, which they felt would have been very useful.

Approachability of lecturers was discussed as both a facilitator and a barrier depending on how approachable the lecturers were. It was mentioned that while lecturers are experts in their fields, they are usually employed based on their research skills rather than their teaching skills. However, the ability to impart knowledge, to inspire and motivate students to learn and the ability to interact with and be approachable for students are important factors in helping students achieve academic success.

## BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Perceptions of worthiness: Perceptions that university is an elitist organisation and the domain of 'other' people was mentioned by several students. While some students came from a background where high academic performance was expected and attending university seen as an automatic progression from second level, some students, who came from working-class or farming backgrounds, single parent families or backgrounds where university was not the norm, said they felt that university was for 'others' and not for them. They viewed university students as being middle class, wealthy, highly intelligent etc. or to quote one student 'others who were well-off and smart'. In some cases, these perceptions persevered until students had the opportunity to attend university much later in life through non-traditional routes. They then faced the barrier of fearing they were not as good as the other students, not as deserving or belonging or smart enough to learn at a university level. They were often the first ones in their immediate and perhaps extended family to attend higher level education. The Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and other formal access and disability college support services were very important in helping these students enter higher level education and supporting them through transition and onwards. For these students, attending university broke unspoken but real barriers about who belongs in university. Perhaps this 'barrier' is something that needs to be addressed at second level education?

Transition from second level education: One of the challenges that the younger students spoke about was the difficulty transitioning from the second level Irish education system. Learning to do well in the Leaving Certificate was said to be done mainly through memorising with students being 'spoon-fed' information. This contrasted with third level education where students direct and manage their own learning and need to be critical thinkers. Students mentioned that the methods used at second level sometimes work for students in their first year and maybe the second year of university where students can memorise enough information to pass (depending on the course). However, these strategies really start to fail students in third year when the level of critical thinking and the

volume of work is at a much higher level and students who did not start to use more high-level learning strategies earlier in their third level studies really start to struggle.

Students thought that the differences between the two methods of teaching and learning caused a real difficulty for students and that significant changes would need to be made to second level teaching to enable students to make that transition more easily.

Self-doubt: The issue of self-doubt was raised by several students as one of the barriers to success. Some students doubted their ability to get a good degree while others doubted their ability to remain in college, concerned they would not pass first year. Some mature students who applied through alternative routes, especially doubted their ability when faced with a class of young students who had got places based on the CAO points system. For some, just passing first year and progressing into second year was viewed as a success. However, once they had successfully made the transition into second year, their confidence in their abilities began to grow and their focus changed from surviving first year to doing well in future years and expanding their horizons to take up the other, non-academic opportunities college offered. Mature students also began to see how their previous life and career skills could be an asset in their university experience and gave them different benefits to those of the younger, less experienced students.

Language: Language was a potential barrier for some students if English was not their native language. Academic English being of a higher standard than that of conversational English posed a difficulty for some international students. Even for some native-English speakers, there was a level of academic English and jargon that some students found difficult to adapt to and which posed a challenge to their understanding of a topic.

Physical learning spaces: Lack of physical learning spaces for students to meet with each other were mentioned as a barrier to learning. In the age where constructivist learning principles are known to benefit student learning, students need access to suitable spaces for peer-to-peer or group work. However, students feel that this is not being given sufficient consideration by institutions and spaces for this type of learning are not being adequately facilitated.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this seminar was to explore what 'student success' means to students and to identify the main facilitators and barriers to students achieving that success. An important aspect of this seminar therefore was to hear the student voice on these questions. Final year students and first year alumni were asked to participate as they had progressed through several years of study and could therefore reflect on how they and their views had changed over the preceding years and also what they thought of their university experience as they prepared to enter the next stage of their lives.

What the seminar showed is that definitions of student success is as varied as the number of students defining it. Every student that feels successful has an individual story of what that success means.

However, when the barriers and facilitators were discussed, a number of key points were reiterated by several students:

Facilitators:

- **College supports:** Formal college services such as student learning services, counselling services, disability services, access services, career services, peer mentoring and academic teaching and learning services all provide the formal networks which help students become successful.
- **Other supports networks:** Family, friends, peers, lecturers also form an integral part of the supports that students rely on as they progress through college.
- **Extra-curricular activities:** Student unions, societies, mentoring programmes, volunteering programmes, Erasmus programmes etc allow students to develop a skills, networks, friendships, experiences outside of their normal academic studies. These are important for their own personal development and for future career prospects.
- **Inner resources:** Motivation, perseverance, self-belief, self-efficacy, empowerment are important inner resources in helping students to overcome the difficulties they face. They can be the difference between staying and dropping out of college. Helping students to develop these resources is therefore important and worth investing in.

Barriers:

- **Perception** that college is not for them; that it is for 'other' people who are richer, smarter etc.
- **Self-doubt** on encountering a new academic environment that requires a new set of skills. The role of student support services was mentioned as being helpful in overcoming these difficulties.
- **Language difficulties** for students whose first language was not English.

- **Academic English** was found to be more difficult to understand than normal conversational English even for native English speakers.
- **Mental health** was a barrier for some students, some of which resulted from adverse circumstances faced by students in college and some were pre-existing conditions that students have before starting college.
- **Student spaces:** Lack of spaces where students can collaborate or share as a way of facilitating peer learning,
- **Feedback:** Inconsistent or generic feedback on academic assignments
- **Teaching ability**: Some lecturers have a research-based background and may have little or no teaching training or experience.
- **Other barriers:** included financial issues, accommodation problems and interpersonal relationship problems that occur generally in life and can have a significant negative effect on student success.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

As stated previously on p.7, whilst the focus of the seminar was on the student view of student success and what facilitates or hinders that and not on recommendations, some recommendations did emerge during the seminar.

- College support services (Student Learning, Disability, Counselling, Access, Careers) be developed to cater to the growing number of students each year. As they provide both support when problems arise and help prevent issues arising, strengthening these services in colleges will not only increase student success but will increase student retention which will ultimately be reflected in improved college statistics.
- Harness graduates from those demographics which are underrepresented at third level to be ambassadors in their areas, to talk to school children at secondary and perhaps even primary level to show them that college can be an option for them.
- Develop more extensive English language support services for students who are not native English language speakers.
- Provide increased physical student learning spaces to enable students to learn with and from each other.
- Centres for Teaching & Learning that support academic staff need to be expanded to all lecturing staff so that they can be more effective in teaching students.
- Feedback on assignments should be specific, unambiguous and provide the student with information on how they can improve their knowledge, critical thinking and writing.
- There should be diversity in how students are assessed e.g. a range of formats of continuous assessments as well as summative assessments.
- Flexibility around electives was suggested for final year students to enable them to tailor their study to their individual requirements.
- Students should have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities such as student societies, sports, student union activities that promote personal and social development and that help develop life-long and career-enhancing skills such as negotiation skills, team work skills, management skills etc.
- A model of how extracurricular activities map to professional development would be useful in helping students see their wider potential.
- Incorporation of practical aspects, such as internships, to courses as a way of helping students learn real-life as opposed to theoretical skills, which would help them be more successful after they graduate.
- Peer mentoring by alumni could be developed through the careers or alumni services which would facilitate students feeling more confident going into a work environment.

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# Appendices

## Appendix i - Programme of seminar - Learning from Student Success: Barriers and Facilitators

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

### National Seminar Series 2018/2019

**Learning from Student Success: Barriers and Facilitators.**

**Venue: Global Room, TCD**

**Date: February 21, 2019**

***'Student voice is integral to genuinely hear from the student population their recommendations for change as producers of their own success', Allen and Nichols (2017) Do you hear me? Student voice, academic success and retention. Student Success Volume 8, Issue 2, pp. 123-129***

| | |
|---|---|
| 9.30-10.00 | Registration |
| 10.00-10.15 | Welcome: Mike Wride (CAPSL, TCD) |
| 10.15-11.15 | Keynote: Invited speaker: Cat O'Driscoll, NStep, USI, Oisin Hassan, Deputy President/Vice President for Academic Affairs (USI) |
| 11:15-11:45: | Coffee/Tea and student submissions viewing |
| 11.45-12.00 | Introduction to student speakers |
| 12.00-12.20 | Talk 1: Looking back to the start: Views of success of final year students on their first year: *Talking to my first year self.* |
| 12.20-12.40 | Talk 2: Heading out: Views of success of final year students: *Talking to my final year self.* |
| 12:40-13:00 | *Talk 3:* Looking Back: Views of Success of Alumni: *Talking to my student self.* |
| 13.00-14.00 | Lunch and student written submissions viewing |
| 14.00-14.45 | Panel discussion: Student Perspectives and Experiences of Success: |
| | Presentations of student work and a panel discussion of students from different disciplines and different institutions |
| 14.45-16.15 | Groupwork: identifying barriers and facilitators of student success: |
| | Staff and students co-create knowledge around success and share and compare what success means to them (will be used to produce resource docs). |
| 16.15-16.30 | Closing Remarks. |

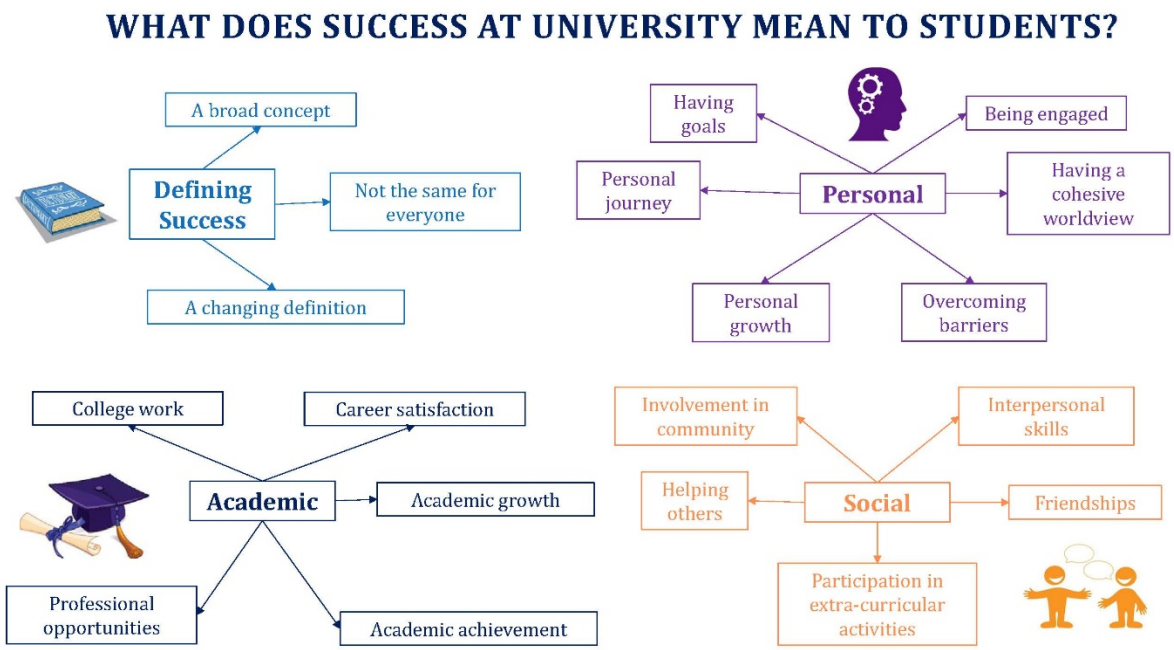
## Appendix ii –Thematic analysis based on initial written submissions from students

The initial three themes; academic, personal and social which were developed from analysis of the written submissions from students prior to the seminar. These were used as a discussion point for the workshop on the day of the seminar (Figure 1).

Each theme was discussed by two groups of staff/students during the workshop and the ensuing outputs formed the themes and sub-themes detailed in the figures below (Figures 2-7).

These themes form a framework for discussing the content from the student talks and panel discussion on the day of the seminar, though .

*Figure 1 Themes identified from the written submissions of 24 students from 5 universities, prior to the seminar*



## Appendix ii –Thematic analyses from seminar workshop discussion

*Figure 2 Facilitators of Academic Student Success based on seminar workshop discussion*

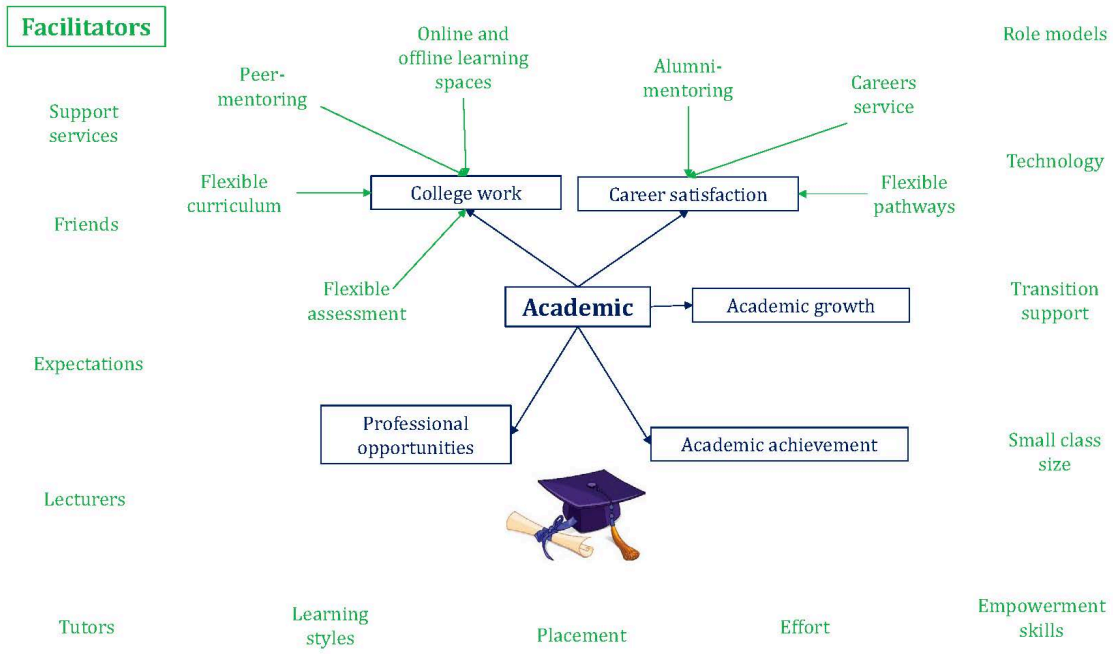


*Figure 3 Barriers to Academic Student Success based on seminar workshop discussion*

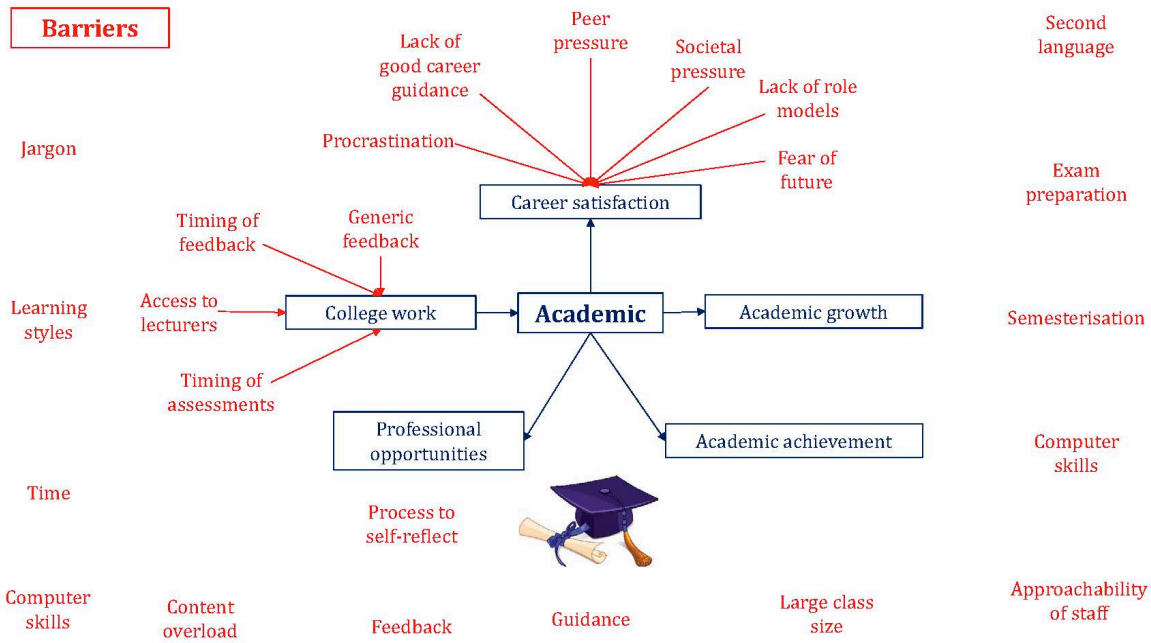


*Figure 4 Facilitators of Personal Student Success based on seminar workshop discussion*

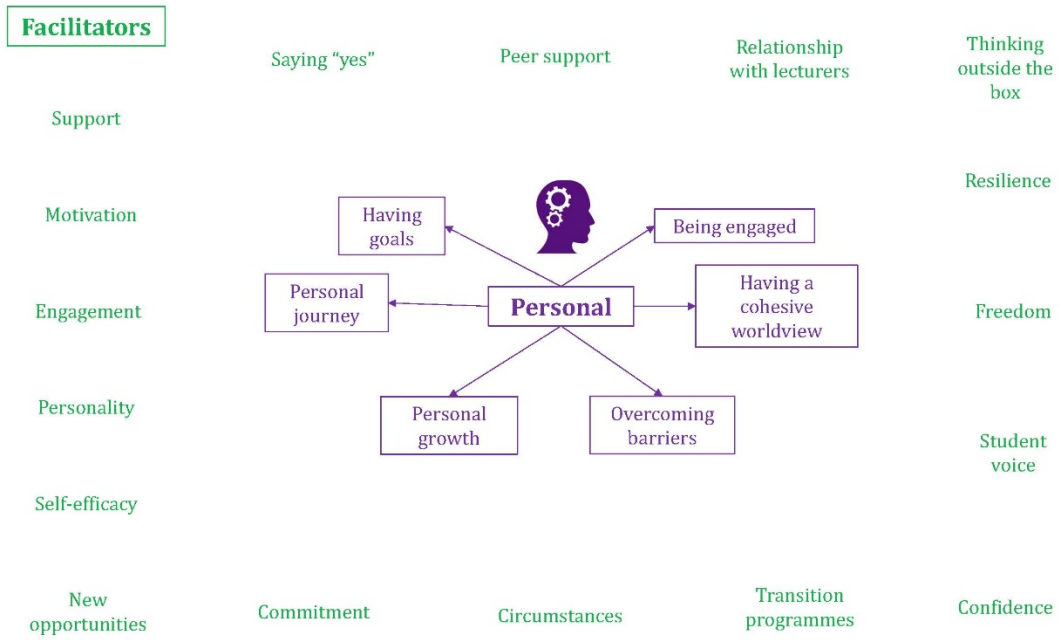


*Figure 5 Barriers to Personal Student Success based on seminar workshop discussion*

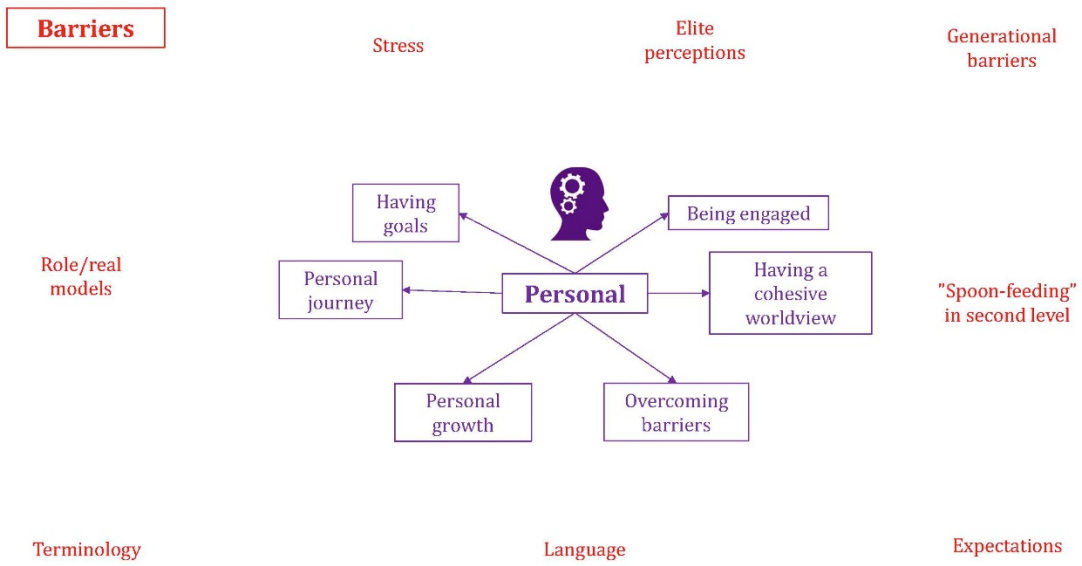


*Figure 6 Facilitators of Social Student Success based on seminar workshop discussion*

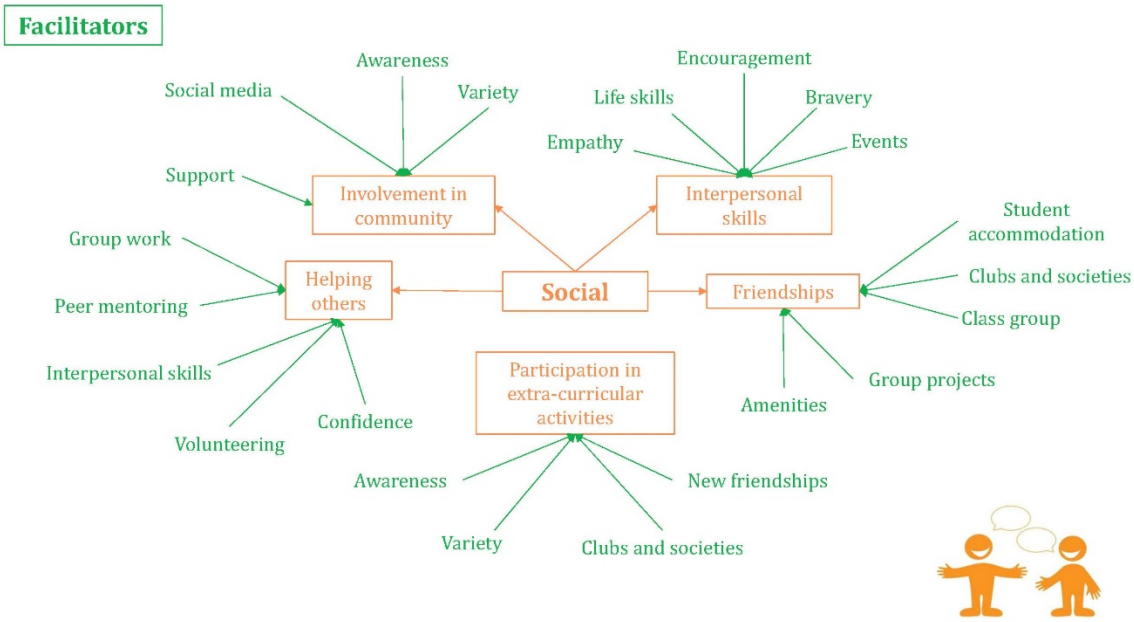
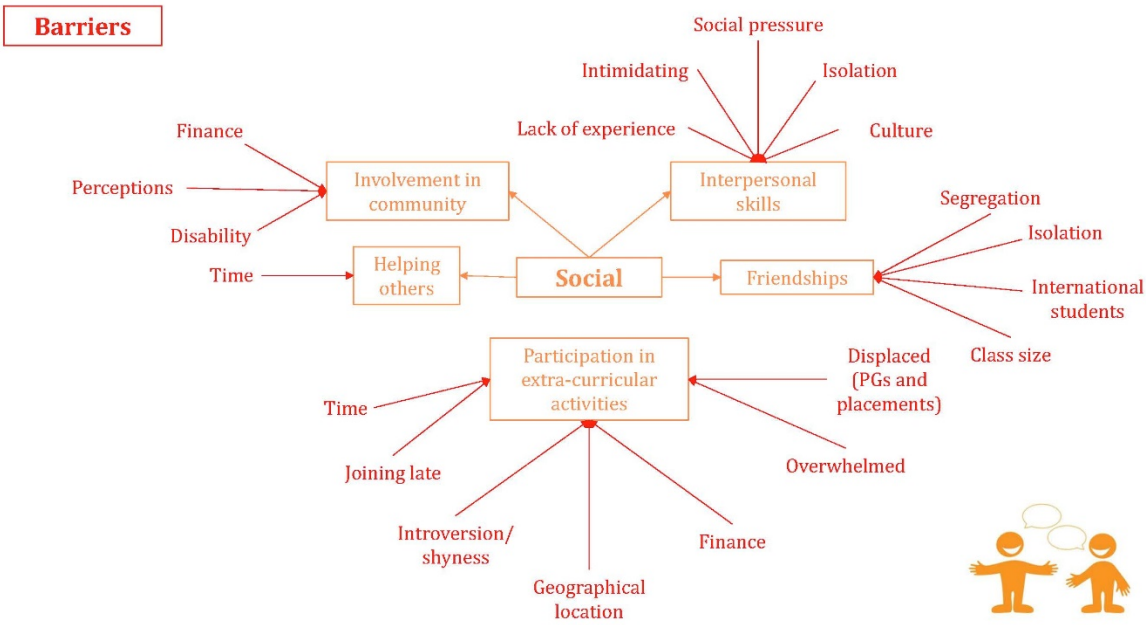



*Figure 7 Barriers to Social Student Success based on seminar workshop discussion*