

REACHING OUT: WHY STUDENTS LEAVE

Briefing Paper 1 **2016**

Scholarship in Teaching
and Learning funded by
the National Forum:

*Strengthening Ireland's
evidence base for
teaching and learning
enhancement in higher
education*



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

Reaching Out: Why Students Leave

Briefing Paper 1 **2016**



Published by:

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
c/o 19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

T: +353 1 6090648

Email admin@teachingandlearning.ie

Web: www.teachingandlearning.ie

November 2016

Foreword

This research comes at a time of peak interest in the subject of student retention. Increasing interest is the result of two major developments in higher education and the student experience in the past decade. First, there has been an increased attentiveness to the quality of the student experience, particularly in the relationship between student welfare and academic performance. Second, institutions have become increasingly dependent on student numbers, and student non-completion can have significant consequences for the budgets of academic units.

These are developments that pose serious questions for the higher education sector as a whole. And yet, until recently we have known so little about the factors triggering non-completion. The achievement of this particular piece of research is that it provides a broad but nuanced picture of the experiences of students who have not completed their programmes of study in higher education. It is the only student-led research in Ireland into factors influencing non-completion. These are invaluable perspectives and the USI is grateful that the National Forum has collected them.

When we look deeply into the factors influencing student non-completion, it is easy to see why it can be a challenging issue to address. The research clearly demonstrates that to optimise their chances of staying in college, students need the linked-up support of the admissions process, their teachers and guidance counsellors at second level, a broad range of higher education staff, institutions themselves, their friends, parents and guardians, and their students' union. Collaboration between stakeholders across the post-primary and higher education sectors will be difficult to coordinate. But this is the true nature of a forum, and this is a challenge that we must embrace.

We are grateful to the National Forum for its insistence that teaching and learning is inherently a student-centred pursuit. Its commitment to understanding and incorporating the student perspective directly improves the student experience across the country. I am confident that we will be able to use this research to help students for many years to come.

Jack Leahy

Vice President for Academic Affairs, Union of Students in Ireland

Chair's Preface

This report adds to the growing evidence base about the challenges that students face in their transitions into and through higher education in Ireland. One of the important aspects of this research is that it represents a genuine and substantial partnership with students across the sector, and because of this, it enables us to understand key issues in a way that respects and recognises the role that students must play in informing the higher education sector about the nature of their experiences as learners.

This report builds on a number of recent related reports published within the *Teaching for Transitions* enhancement theme by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

While we have been building a stronger evidence base on transitions experiences and though we have much now to draw from when it comes to the demographics and statistics relating to non-completion, we still have much to learn from the underlying articulated experiences of students. Students' own stories and accounts of the challenges they have faced and the issues that arise for them can shed additional and informative light on the experience of non-completion and can show us ways in which we can build a better strategy for supporting and helping students to manage the often difficult transition into higher education.

Professor Sarah Moore

Chair, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Table of Contents

Key Insights	2
Introduction	3
Aims of the Study	3
Methods and Data Analysis	4
Study Participants	4
Findings	5
Prior to Entering Higher Education	5
Experiences of Higher Education	7
The Decision to Leave	9
<i>Discussing the decision to leave</i>	10
<i>Reflections on the decision</i>	12
Conclusions and Recommendations	13
References	15

Key Insights

- The evidence suggests that student experiences and student retention within higher education are strongly impacted by the accuracy and depth of information students have at their disposal when deciding where and what to study.
 - Open days and course-related materials were considered effective sources of information by many students in finding out about a prospective course.
 - Teachers, media and career guidance tended to be perceived by participating students as somewhat less effective sources of information.
- More than half of participating students found some aspect of their higher education experience to be different from what they expected.
- Many students struggled with the workload and the self-directed nature of learning encountered in higher education.
- Unexpected course content, stress, financial difficulties, difficulties making friends and high workloads were common factors associated with non-completion.
- Many students referred to events outside of their academic lives that impacted upon their ability to participate successfully in their programmes of study.
- In making their decisions to leave, most students did not consult relevant institutional supports or those available in the students' union. Reasons given were because they were unaware of such supports or did not feel they would be helpful.

Introduction

The proportion of students who do not progress past their first year of study in higher education stands currently at approximately 16%. Gender, prior educational attainment, institution type and field of study have all been found to play a role in predicting likelihood of progression. Female students are more likely to progress than male students, higher Leaving Certificate points are associated with higher progression rates and non-progression is generally more prevalent within institutes of technology than within the university sector. Construction and related disciplines have the highest non-progression rate, at 29%, while education disciplines have the lowest rate, at 5%. (HEA, 2016)

Less is known about the underlying experiences of students and there is less in-depth research drawing upon students' accounts of their learning journeys. Retention is a complex area encompassing cultural, economic, social and institutional factors, all of which mediate levels of student engagement (Tinto, 2006). Teaching and learning may be enhanced by a clearer understanding of why students choose to enter Irish higher education, why they opt for certain courses, how they experience higher education and what factors prompt their decisions not to continue.

A review of existing qualitative data on student non-completion recorded across 16 Irish institutes of higher education found that the factors most associated with non-completion are those which relate to the course itself, personal factors, financial concerns, health/medical issues and family circumstances (National Forum, 2015d). Within the specific area of computing – an area of study that has been the subject of particular attention – the evidence suggests that students' prior engagement with the subject area and their understanding of what computing courses entail are strong predictors of likelihood to progress (National Forum, 2015b).

The current briefing paper adds to the existing research base by summarising the findings of research carried out by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum), in partnership with the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), during the 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years. The study examined, through surveys and interviews, the motivations and experiences of 331 students who did not complete their programmes of study in higher education. Preliminary findings from an initial stage of this research were published in 2015, illustrating the storied experiences of five students as well as insights from students' union representatives regarding non-completion (National Forum, 2015a). The current briefing paper provides a summary of complete findings from the two-year student-centred project and aims to inform future decisions regarding how best to engage with students and support their transitions into and through Irish higher education.

Aims of the Study

- To further inform our understanding of why some students do not progress to the completion of their programmes of study in higher education
- To determine how best to support students in their transitions into and through higher education

Methods and Data Analysis

Two online surveys, hosted on the USI website, were used to gather data regarding the reasons why students leave higher education courses early and how they make the decision to do so. One survey was circulated during the 2014-15 academic year and one during the 2015-16 academic year. The surveys were promoted by the USI nationally, through social media outlets, and locally, by on-campus USI representatives. During each of the two data collection years, all students were made aware of the availability of the survey and invited to complete it if they had chosen not to complete their programmes of study. The surveys focused on the motivations and concerns students had prior to entering higher education, their experiences of higher education, and the factors which influenced their decisions not to continue in their given courses of study. In addition to the survey data, five respondents in the 2014-15 survey volunteered to take part in follow-up individual interviews that allowed their experiences to be shared in more depth.

Descriptive analyses of quantitative survey data were carried out in Excel. The interview data and open-ended answers from the surveys were coded for meaning and subsequently analysed for recurring patterns/themes.

Study Participants

In all, 331 students who did not complete their programmes of study took part in this research, 161 during the 2014-15 academic year (including five interviewees) and 170 during the 2015-16 academic year. For those students who responded to the demographics questions, the breakdown was as shown in Figure 1. The breakdown of representation between universities, institutes of technology and other colleges was 53%, 41% and 6%, respectively.

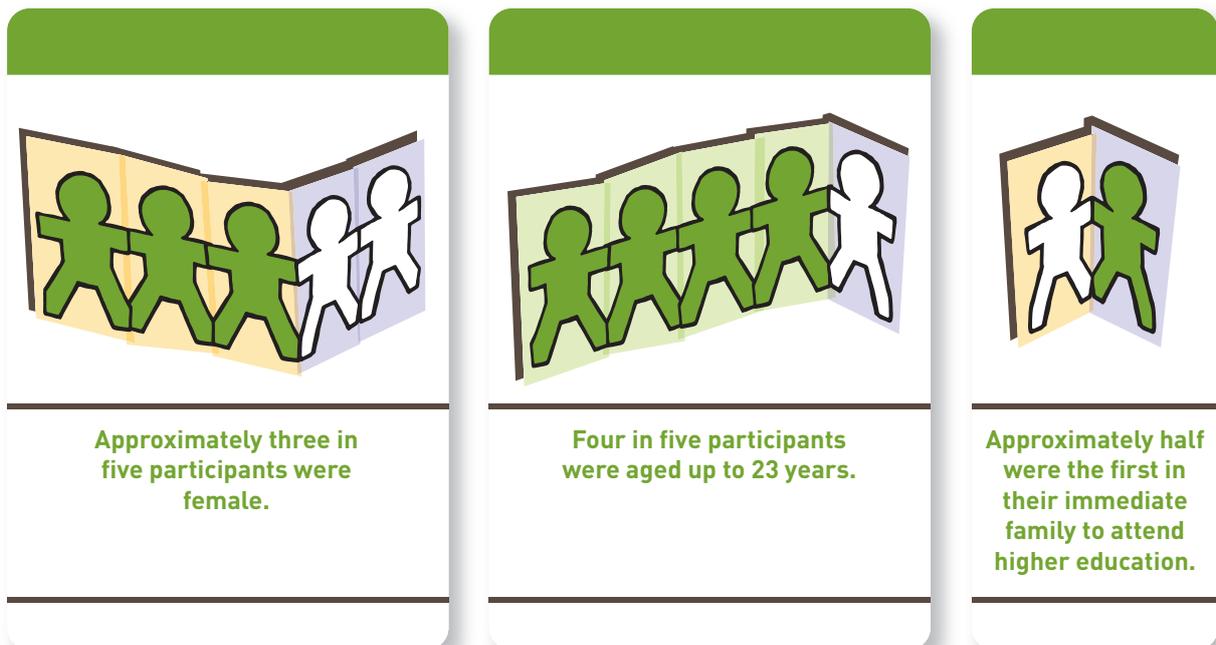


Figure 1 Survey participants

Findings

The findings are presented in three sections. First, participating students' decisions regarding where and what to study, the sources of information influencing such decisions and the concerns of students prior to entering higher education are examined. Second, the participants' experiences of higher education are described. The reasons for student non-completion are then discussed.

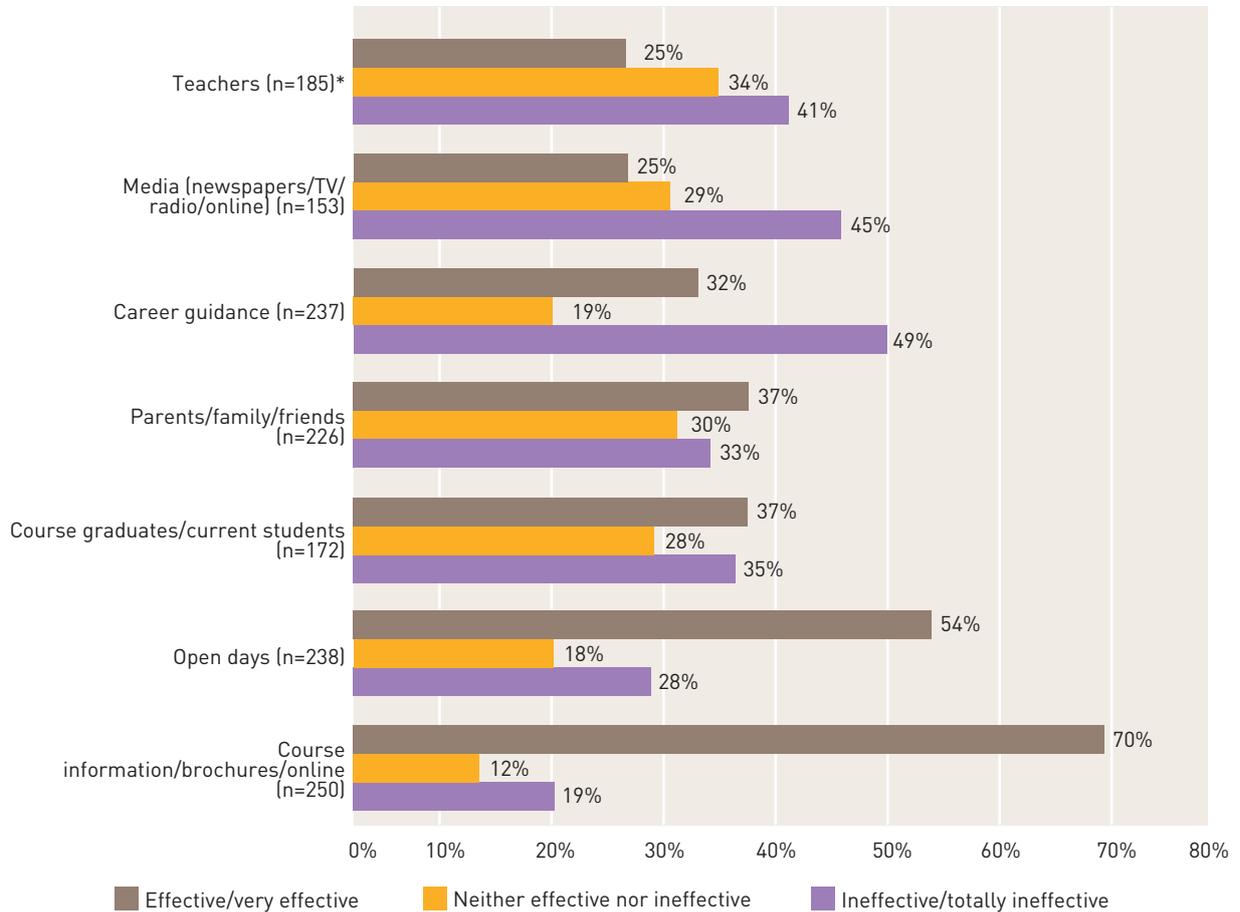
Prior to Entering Higher Education

Key Insights

- **Students were motivated to enter their chosen programmes of study mainly by the course content, future career prospects or course location.**
- **The evidence suggests that student experiences and student retention within higher education are strongly impacted by the accuracy and depth of information students have at their disposal when deciding where and what to study.**
- **Open days and course-related materials were considered effective sources of information by many students in finding out about a prospective course.**
- **Teachers, media and career guidance tended to be perceived by participating students as somewhat less effective sources of information.**

When selecting their courses of study, factors rated as most important were the specific course content, future career/job opportunities and the location of the course. The reputation of the institution and parental/teacher influence were seen to be slightly less influential factors. Additionally, many students chose to study where their friends studied.

Most responding students (83%) were offered the first or second choice from their CAO application. In an effort to uncover students' decision-making processes prior to embarking on their programmes of study, participants were asked which sources of information they used in attempting to inform themselves about their chosen programmes of study. The most commonly used sources were course information from brochures and online sources, open days, and career guidance services. Participants were also asked to rate how effective a number of sources were in providing information on their given courses (see Figure 2).



*The number of students who gave a rating for each source varied. Percentages are therefore of the number who rated the given source in each case.

Figure 2 Perceived level of effectiveness of various sources of course information

It is interesting to note that while course graduates/current students were considered effective as sources of information by over one third of those who rated them, this was the least used source of information in informing students’ decisions regarding which course to choose.

The period of informing themselves about potential courses was seen to be a crucial turning point in the educational journeys of these students. When asked, based on their experience, what advice they would give to a student about to enter higher education, the most common advice centred on making a well-informed course selection, with many suggesting that students talk to former/current students of the course. Ill-informed course selection or a lack of understanding around course content remained the most common theme across the whole data set. The following quotes are illustrative:

I made my decision based on the institution and neglected to properly research the course context. I just wanted to go there and did not consider whether the course was suitable.

I gave no thought to the course I was doing; I went to a school where everyone goes to college so I just picked what all the other guys were doing and found out that it really wasn't for me.

The course was nothing like what the Leaving Cert equivalent had led me to anticipate. English is not the same.

It was the wrong course for me. I only realised it when I started the course and saw what it was like.

Choose your course very wisely, have your homework done on the course and the college. Talk to the lecturers of the course that you want to do. See the college and the course and see will you like it. You might only be in the course a month and realise it is not for you. Pick something that you have an interest in, that you would like and that would suit you.

Having chosen a course, participants had a number of concerns about their impending studies. Financial concerns featured most prominently. Other concerns centred on course workload and content and adapting to college life and an unfamiliar environment.

Experiences of Higher Education

Key Insights:

- **More than half of participating students found some aspect of their higher education experience to be different from what they expected.**
- **Many students struggled with the workload and the self-directed nature of learning encountered in higher education.**
- **Many students referred to events outside of their academic lives which impacted upon their ability to participate successfully in their programmes of study.**

Although most students attended class regularly, almost one third did not understand the material presented in class (see Figure 3). Approximately half of participating students found the college experience different to what they expected. Similar proportions struggled with the course content and/or workload.

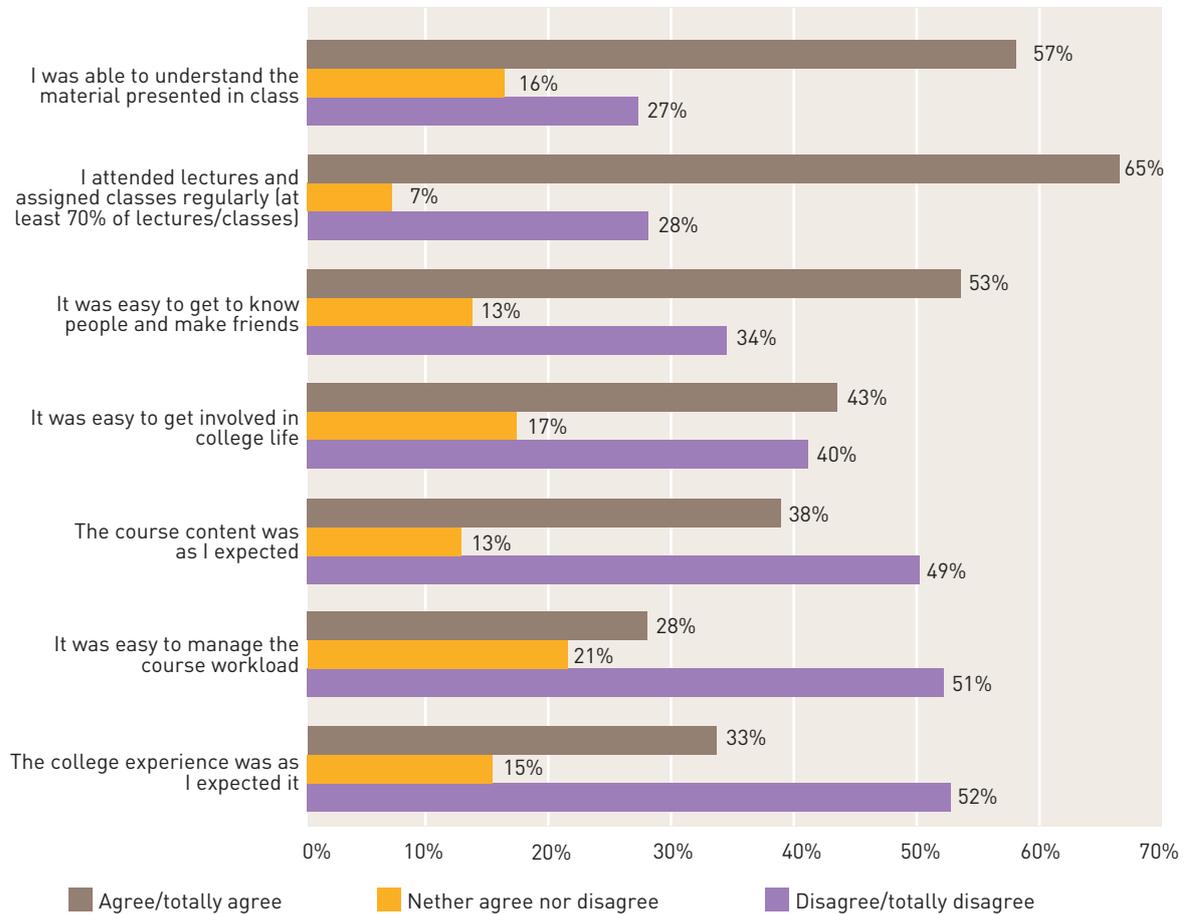


Figure 3 Students' experience of various aspects of higher education (n = 312)

Some students felt they were unprepared for the type of learning that is expected in higher education, referring to its independent nature and need for self-direction.

You need to break first year students into the college experience, how to study and how to keep on top of things.

I was never good in school but I taught myself how to 'book learn'. But then in college it was completely different and especially in my course, psychology, it is all about yourself, you are in charge of everything. It is not like with a business course, which is very structured, you are in free flow. Whoever could latch on does but if you lose your grip, then you are lost and I lost my grasp.

In addition to their experience of college life in general, a large proportion of respondents experienced unexpected life events which impacted upon their college experience. The most commonly cited were deaths of family members or friends, personal physical or mental health issues, and illness within the family. Indeed, stress and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression featured across many of the open-ended survey responses.

Some also struggled with a sense that some of their lecturers lacked empathy or were unwilling to help them.

When I asked the lecture for help the reply was 'if you're not able for the course then you shouldn't be here in the first place'.

When you put effort into a design project, present it in front of your class, and you get lots of criticism but not really constructive or encouraging in any way . . . I began to feel that I was not good enough to do the course and everything that I did was wrong.

The Decision to Leave

Key Insights:

- **Unexpected course content, stress, financial difficulties, difficulties making friends and high workloads were common factors associated with non-completion.**
- **In making their decisions to leave, most students did not consult relevant institutional supports or those available in the students' union. Reasons given were because they were unaware of such supports or did not feel they would be helpful.**

Figure 4 illustrates the factors which influenced respondents' decisions to leave. These factors were also evident in the interviews and open-ended survey responses.

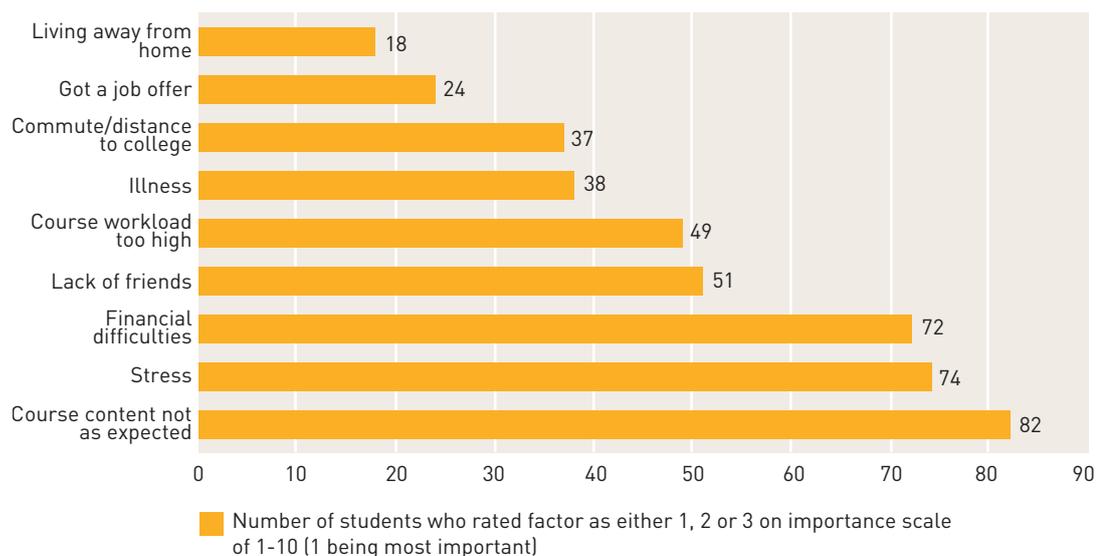


Figure 4 Factors which influenced the decision to leave (n = 222)

I regret totally the past year in college. I found the course content for the most part interesting. But it is impossible to make any meaningful headway when we had project after project after project after project. The workload was excessively high.

It is very hard emotionally and people do not realise this at all.

I couldn't afford to continue attending college as I need to work at least 30 hours a week to pay for everything but I was studying a course with high contact hours.

I suffer from anxiety and depression which both got very bad during my Leaving Cert year but it got worse during my first semester at college. The workload and having to make a new group of friends brought me to breaking point of stress which meant I had to leave.

Several respondents referred to social isolation. Some had chosen to study where their school friends studied, anticipating that they would remain in close contact and this had not happened.

I followed my school friends to UCD and didn't understand how big the college was and how hard it would be to see them regularly.

Couldn't see my friends that I had followed to the college as we were in different courses.

For some, the offer of suitable jobs prompted them to leave their courses:

I enjoyed college but then I got temporary work and am still in that job. But as a person in my late 50s it is working that I want to be rather than in college.

Other factors included illness (either personal or that of family members) and the need to either live away from home or commute long distances.

Discussing the decision to leave

Parents, friends and other students were consulted when students were making their decisions far more commonly than institutional or students' union representatives (see Figure 5).

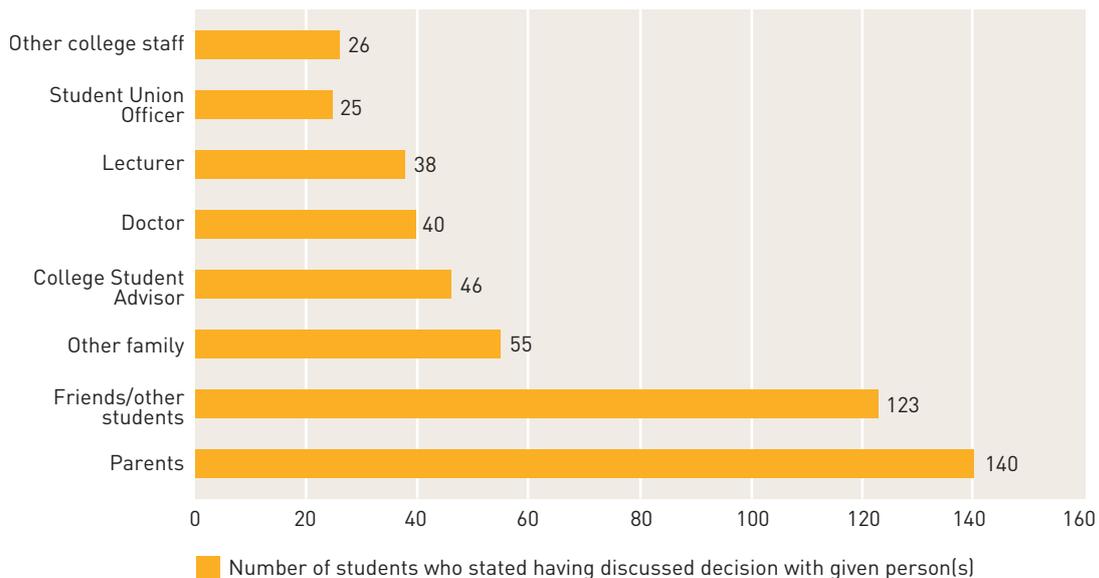


Figure 5 People with whom students discussed decision to leave (n = 206)

The majority of students discussed their decision with more than one group, while almost half of respondents discussed the decision with three or more groups. Students had mixed experiences of engaging with supports:

I spoke to the staff in student careers services, lecturers and a counsellor about my difficulties with the course . . . The only advice I received was to 'stick with it', that it was my only option, despite me being severely unhappy and not motivated.

In contrast, when students were prompted to name anyone else with whom they discussed their decision, a number of students responded that they did not discuss the decision with anyone before leaving. Those who did not seek assistance or support from available services mentioned either not being aware of what was available or not believing the services would be in a position to help:

I did not realise how they could help me. I had never been in such a situation, so I had no way of knowing.

Didn't think they would have power to deal with college in terms of financial difficulties.

What could they do? Wave a magic wand and make it all better? As I said, the course workload was too high. And I'm not a lazy person. I'm willing to work.

Reflections on the decision

Although the decision not to continue was never easy, it did not follow that it was always negative. It did, in some cases, lead to preferred pathways, as the following survey responses show:

I left in May and started a new course and a new college in September and now I'm in 4th year and couldn't be happier. I'm glad I didn't give up completely as I value education. I wish I'd realised sooner I didn't enjoy my course but I didn't want to be a quitter or seen as a failure.

[Having reapplied and been accepted for a more suitable course] I finally feel like I'm going to college to do what I want to do, and for that, I couldn't be more proud of myself.

Honestly, it's not that I hated college or my course but I just felt like college wasn't for me. I have a job starting on Monday full time and I'm much happier starting work than staying in college. Maybe I'll go back to college someday but for now it's not for me.

Many non-completing students either went on to employment or registered for an alternative course of study. However, subsequent fees incurred were prohibitive for some of those who wished to pursue alternative studies in higher education.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study tie closely with those of other National Forum research within the *Teaching for Transitions* enhancement theme. The main drivers for non-completion are ill-chosen courses and courses not meeting the expectations of students. Non-completion is also strongly influenced by the stress associated with factors outside of the course of study such as financial concerns, commuting distance, practical responsibilities or unexpected life events (National Forum, 2015d). The importance of students being well prepared for what higher education in general, and their given courses in particular, will entail has also been demonstrated (National Forum 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d). The following recommendations are suggested based on what has been learned about the factors which lead to student non-completion.

Informing course choices

Prospective students need access to clearly-worded, relevant and accurate information about what precisely a course entails prior to making course choices. This has implications for the form and content of both official programme documentation and course marketing materials. Having current students speak with prospective students has been shown to be a particularly effective way of informing course decisions (National Forum, 2016).

Preparing students for higher education

Practices found to be effective in preparing students for higher education may be suitable for introduction/expansion across the FET and post-primary sectors. These include giving students the opportunity to experience a variety of assessment types, encouraging a stronger focus on critical thinking, research and self-directed learning and the opportunity for experiential visits to higher education institutions.

Taking account of personal factors resulting in non-completion

Stress, financial concerns, personal physical and mental health issues, and unexpected life events were common among non-completing students in this study. For those struggling with such concerns, institutions and the academic, administrative and support staff within them have the opportunity to be supportive, helpful and show empathy to students in all of their interactions.

Communicating about nature and benefits of supports

In this study, most non-completing students did not access supports available to them in higher education, some because they were unaware of them, others because they did not expect the supports to help. This suggests that messages regarding the practical, academic or social supports available to students within institutions and students' unions may benefit from being communicated in a more directed way, with a specific emphasis on how the services might help with commonly identified issues faced by non-completing students.

Flexible transfer routes and part-time provision

For those who found themselves in an unsuitable programme of study, non-completion often led students to pursue other courses in higher education. For others, time and financial constraints stood in the way. Flexible internal transfer routes, adequate financial supports and provision for students to complete their courses on a part-time basis may encourage students who wish to complete a programme of study in higher education.

Limitations of this Study

The acknowledged limitations associated with a self-selecting participant group apply in this study.

Acknowledgements

Sincere gratitude is extended to the participating students who shared their thoughts and experiences to contribute to our better understanding of non-completion within Irish higher education.

References

- Higher Education Authority. (2016). A study of progression in Irish Higher Education 2012/13-2013/14. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.
- National Forum. (2015a). Reaching out: Student drop-out. Briefing Paper 2 2015. Dublin: National Forum.
- National Forum. (2015b). Student non-completion on ICT programmes. Briefing Paper 1 2015. Dublin: National Forum.
- National Forum. (2015c). Transition from second level and further education to higher education. Dublin: National Forum.
- National Forum. (2015d). Why students leave: Findings from qualitative research into student non-completion in higher education in Ireland. Dublin: National Forum.
- National Forum. (2016). Transition from Further Education and Training to Higher Education. Dublin: National Forum.
- Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: what next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 8(1), 1-19.



National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
in Higher Education

c/o 19 Dawson Street

Dublin 2

T: +353 1 6090648

info@teachingandlearning.ie

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.4244960.v1

www.teachingandlearning.ie