UCC Response to Early Withdrawal (University College Cork)

Key Features

1. Was the initiative established specifically to promote progression and retention and/or to address non-progression rates?

   Yes

2. Please state the institutional commitments or national priorities with which this initiative is aligned — for example, an institutional policy or strategic plan, an indicator in the institution's Performance Agreement under the System Performance Framework, and/or the National Access Plan?

   - First Year Change of Course Policy
   - Undergraduate Student Withdrawals Policy

3. Title of lead or section responsible for the initiative/measure

   First Year Experience Coordinator

4. Focus

- First-year students
- New entrants
- All students
- Early intervention initiative
- Institution-wide initiative
- Institution Policy

5. Theme

- Student wellbeing, experience, & success focus

Overview of Initiative

6. Briefly describe the initiative, with reference to

- Why, and when introduced
- Overview of activities/intervention
- Success to date & next steps.

UCC appointed a First Year Experience (FYE) Coordinator in 2007 to help students adjust academically, socially and personally to university life and to strengthen the retention and progression rates of incoming students. The FYE Coordinator monitors very closely early withdrawals from September – 1 March, conducts Exit Interviews and facilitates students to change course at the beginning of Semester 1.

Analysis of data from 2007–2012 indicated a clear trend that a significant proportion of high-achieving students were withdrawing in Semester 1 because they were registered in degree programmes that did not align with their interests and expectations. These students were struggling to build a sense of belonging and were reluctant to engage fully in university life.

In response to clear evidence that early withdrawals were frequently linked to 'wrong programme choice', a structured pathway to change course enabled students to realign their studies with their interests, strengths and long-term goals, thereby improving overall satisfaction and supporting stronger retention and progression rates. Cross-campus collaboration in supporting students to change course has shaped institutional responses to early student withdrawal by bridging the gap between data and the lived experience of students.

Since the introduction of the role of FYE Coordinator, progression and retention rates have improved from 87% in 2007 to 93.4% in 2025.

The FYE Coordinator meets and supports ~450 individual students annually. Students make online and in-person appointments to discuss their concerns and future options. Exit Interviews may, from time to time, be included in the meetings. The objective of Exit Interviews is to:

- Understand the underlying reasons for withdrawals, including academic, social and personal;
- Identify barriers to progression that may require institutional attention;
- Generate actionable insights to inform programme, policy and support improvements;
- Inform and strengthen student success strategies by aligning services with real student experiences;
- Equip students to make informed decisions about their academic and personal pathways;
- Provide a structured space for students to be heard and to articulate their needs;
- Connect students with relevant supports before they disengage fully;
- Offer a sense of closure as students transition out of the programme or institution.

The Withdrawal Form is completed as the final step of the Exit Interview.

Aims and Objectives

7. Aim of the initiative

The initiative provides students who are considering withdrawing early (September/October) with a clear and supportive pathway to change into an academic programme better suited to their interests and abilities. Its purpose is to improve student retention, promote academic success, and ensure that students are enabled to make informed decisions that align with their long-term goals.

8. Objectives

Objective 1

To systematically identify the drivers of early withdrawals and implement targeted, evidence-based interventions that improve progression, equity and overall student success.

Objective 2

To ensure students who consider withdrawing are heard, supported, and guided, while using their feedback to shape more responsive support structures.

Objective 3

To build a reliable evidence base on early withdrawal patterns that informs policy and student success strategies across the university.

9. Actions

- Implement systematic Exit Interviews for withdrawals
- Analyse withdrawal trends by entry route, Leaving Certificate cut-off points or equivalent, and timing
- Integrate findings with retention dashboards
- Share insights with Academic Board, Programme Directors, and Student Success Units

Student Support Actions

- Provide rapid-response appointments with FYE Coordinator for at-risk students
- Introduce early alert mechanisms (registration, attendance, engagement)
- Strengthen referral pathways to Skills Centre, Student Support Services and Fees Office
- Offer decision support conversations to help students explore alternatives (deferral, change of course)

Academic & Programme Actions

- Collaborate with Schools / Departments to address identified barriers (assessment load, timetable issues)
- Enhance transition support for first-year students
- Develop targeted interventions for high-risk modules / programmes

Communication & Engagement

- Improve clarity of programme expectations during recruitment and orientation
- Increase proactive communications with students during critical periods (weeks 1–3, pre-assessment windows)
- Provide staff development on student wellbeing and how to respond to early disengagement

Policy & Process Actions

- Review withdrawal and deferral processes to ensure they are student-centred
- Ensure students are connected to supports before completing withdrawal
- Embed early withdrawal monitoring into institutional quality processes

10. Expected Outcomes

A clearer understanding of why students withdraw early

- A robust evidence base identifying the most common academic, personal, financial and structural drivers of early withdrawals
- Programme-level insights that highlight specific pressure points (e.g. assessment load, timetable issues, transition challenges)

Earlier identification of students at risk

- Improve ability to spot disengagement patterns through analytics, staff referrals, and early alert mechanisms
- More timely interventions that prevent issues from escalating

Reduction in early withdrawal rates

- Year-on-year decrease in early withdrawals within the first semester of first year
- Increased retention and progression rates

Enhanced student experience and support pathways

- Students feel heard, respected and supported during decision-making
- Increased update of academic, wellbeing and financial supports
- More students choosing alternatives to withdrawal (e.g. deferral, programme change, flexi-options, reduced module load)

Improved institutional decision-making

- Data-driven recommendations feeding into UCC's Student Success Strategy (2023–2028)
- Stronger collaboration between Schools / Departments, Student Services and the FYE Coordinator
- Clearer accountability structures for monitoring and responding to withdrawal trends

Better outcomes for students who do withdraw

- Students leave with clarity, closure, and knowledge of future pathways
- Increased likelihood of re-engagement, transfer, or return at a later stage
- Reduced negative impact on student wellbeing and confidence

Resourcing

11. How is the initiative resourced?

Core University funding

Monitoring & Oversight

12. How is the initiative monitored — is there a reporting structure in place or a committee where there is a monitoring of and reporting on progress and the achievement of objectives (e.g. academic council, university executive team)?

Oversight of the First Year Experience is a governance and quality assurance priority in UCC. Recurring reports on first-year withdrawals, withdrawals by programme, profile of students, access route, CAO choice, Leaving Certificate points or equivalent, timing (early / mid / end of semester) and Change of Course are delivered to individual Schools and to Academic Council.

Data & Evidence of Impact

13. How do you know that the initiative is working as planned, i.e.
    - Are data gathered (ongoing monitoring and evaluation of achievement of objectives)?
    - Have the objectives been achieved? What data and evidence are there to support this?

Typically, ~100 students successfully change course each year (~150 register interest). In the period from September 2024 to 1 March 2025, a total of 96 first-year EU students formally withdrew from their degree programmes. This figure represents 2.5% of first-year EU students who had registered by October 2024.

14. Has impact been established, and how? If not at present, how do you plan to gather data and evidence to establish impact?

Since the appointment of the FYE Coordinator in 2007, progression and retention rates have improved from 87% in 2005/2006–2006/2007 to 93.4% in 2024/2025–2025/2026.

In the period from September 2025 to 1 March 2026, early first-year withdrawals continued their downward trajectory, with 92 students formally leaving their degree programmes. This

represents 2.3% of the EU first-year cohort registered by October 2025 – a marginal but meaningful improvement of 0.2% compared with the same period in 2024/25. Notably, this figure reflects a sustained reduction from the 2021/22 withdrawal rate of 4%, signalling a positive multi-year trend in early student retention.

This progress aligns with a series of targeted, student-centred interventions led by the Admissions Office which have strengthened the student experience. Key strategic actions include:

- **Expanding and enhancing the orientation programme**, now delivered over nine days to support stronger academic and social integration
- **Streamlining the Change of Course process**, enabling students to transition more efficiently into programmes better aligned with their interests and strengths
- **Proactively identifying at-risk students**, such as those who receive late-round CAO offers
- **Enhancing integrated service delivery** by ensuring Admissions, Fees, SREO, academic units, and student support teams operate as a coordinated ecosystem — sharing insights, aligning processes and interventions collectively so that students experience seamless support and fewer risk points across their student journey
- **Improving access to the First Year Experience Coordinator**, with both online and in-person appointments available throughout the week
- **Optimising follow-up communication by email after meetings** to reinforce continuity of care and ensure that students feel supported beyond the initial interaction.

Collectively, these measures have contributed to a more cohesive and supportive first-year experience, helping to reduce early withdrawals and enhance the overall student experience. Continuous attention, however, to the first-year experience remains essential to ensure that improvements are maintained, embedded and responsive to emerging student needs.

Future Plans

15. How do you intend to further develop or expand the initiative?

Momentum and Sustainability:
Sustaining first-year retention rates requires ongoing, intentional attention to the factors that most strongly influence student engagement, belonging and retention. While initiatives over the past number of years have strengthened early transition supports, the evidence continues to show that the first semester remains a critical period in shaping students' sense of belonging, academic readiness, and alignment with their chosen degree programme.

To maintain momentum and ensure long-term impact, a structured and proactive approach is needed — one that embeds skills development, expectation setting and early connection building in the core of every programme. The following are recommended strategic initiatives to further enhance the first-year experience and student success.

Early Skills Development:
Objective: Equip students with the foundational academic and personal skills required to navigate university life confidently.

- Expand the Transition Skills Programme (study skills, time management, digital literacy, academic writing, referencing) beyond Fresher's Fest
- Encourage each academic programme to embed dedicated time for skill development and wellbeing initiatives within Semester 1, and to formally partner with the Skills Centre to ensure all students can access timely, discipline-relevant support.

Programme Fit and Expectation Alignment:
Objective: Ensure students have a realistic understanding of programme demands and feel confident in their choice of study.

- Introduce Curriculum Expectation Workshops in the early weeks of Semester 1 to clarify workload, assessment types, learning approaches and expected outcomes
- Provide examples of common first-year challenges and effective coping strategies to normalise the transition experience and reduce anxiety.

Proactive Engagement, Wellbeing and Belonging Support:
Objective: Strengthen students' social and academic integration, with particular attention to groups at higher risk of isolation or disengagement.

- Implement a structured First-Year Mentoring Framework (peer-to-peer and staff-to-student) across all programmes
- Prioritise outreach to students who may struggle to integrate, including commuters, students working long hours, and EU non-Irish students who may experience social isolation at weekends, and late-round CAO students who have missed orientation and the first three weeks of lectures
- Build micro-engagement events into academic programmes — especially those with large lecture cohorts — to help students form early connections
- Introduce targeted follow-up for student who fail Autumn repeats, ensuring these students receive timely academic advising, wellbeing check-ins, and clear pathways (e.g. Change of Course / change of module) for re-engagement before the new semester begins.

Anticipated impact of these initiatives:
Collectively, these actions will:

- Address key drivers of early withdrawal, including programme misalignment, low confidence, and social isolation
- Strengthen both academic and social integration during the first semester
- Provide structured, timely support to students most likely to disengage
- Enhance clarity and consistency of communications around expectations, supports, and pathways to success.

Conclusion:
UCC continues to demonstrate sector-leading performance in first-year retention and progression supported by proactive approaches to monitoring early withdrawal patterns and intervening at key points in the first semester.

Nationally, the HEA begins counting withdrawals from 1 March — six months after students first register — by which time between 5%–10% of first-year students have typically exited higher education (Fleming & Finnegan). In UCC, this figure stands at just 2.3%, reflecting the effectiveness of early stage supports, targeted outreach and programme-level engagement strategies.

Sustained analysis of early withdrawal trends, combined with timely, evidence-informed interventions, ensures that UCC not only maintains but strengthens its position as a national leader in first-year retention and progression. This continued focus on the first-year experience is essential to preserving momentum, enhancing student success and reinforcing UCC's reputation for excellence in student support and transition.

Additional Information

16. Additional information including relevant URLs

- Withdrawal Policy
- Withdrawal Form
- Change of Course Policy
- First Year Experience Coordinator

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