# First Seven Weeks (F7W@UL) (University of Limerick)

## 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?

   Key Performance Indicator 1.3 in the UL–HEA Performance Agreement of >92% progression for new entrants by 2028.

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

   Centre for Transformative Learning

4. Focus

- First-year students
- New entrants
- All students
- Transition focus
- Targeted initiative (specific student cohort/faculty)
- Institution-wide initiative
- Commuter students

### 5. Theme

- Student wellbeing, experience, & success
- First year experience

# Overview of Initiative

### 6. Briefly describe the initiative, with reference to

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

The First Seven Weeks (F7W) programme was launched by UL in 2009 as the first of its kind in Ireland. Designed to enhance the first-year undergraduate student experience, it provided structured support for adjustment to university life resulting in increased student retention and progression.
In 2025, a university-wide action-focused working group was established to revise and enhance the programme within the framework of the first-year experience and the UL Student Engagement Forum. The revised and rebranded programme, **F7W@UL**, was informed by a changed higher education landscape after Covid-19. The initiative adopts a holistic approach to student engagement and success by addressing students' social, academic, and practical needs over seven themed weeks.

Key changes include:

1. Expanding our target audience to include all incoming students including ‘New @UL’ students, those returning from cooperative placement, studying abroad, illness, bereavement, and any other extended period of leave.
2. Highlighting key information, supports, and resources for our commuting students, who face a particular set of challenges.
3. Ensuring our social media communication is clear, correct, concise, and facilitates feedback and the closing of the feedback loop.

**Original F7W initiative:**

A F7W task force implemented the original initiative, informed by existing student feedback, staff input, and international best practice, research, and theory on student retention and progression, which highlighted the importance of early positive experiences for student success. The programme offered a structured and supportive environment that helped these students acclimate to university life.
F7W addressed common barriers faced by first-year undergraduate students, such as adjusting to new teaching styles, developing independent learning skills, and navigating university campus and resources. The themed weeks focused on key areas such as making friends, study skills, health and wellbeing, and academic advising. The goal was to address non-progression rates by providing early intervention and support.

The longevity and mainstreaming of the F7W programme are testament to its success. It is reviewed and enhanced annually to ensure currency and relevance for UL's students.

**F7W@UL programme implemented in AY2025/26:**
The revised programme addresses student needs over the following seven themed weeks, all of which seed positive engagement:

- **Belong @UL (Weeks 1 & 5)** — Build connections and community
- **Be Well @UL (Weeks 2 & 6)** — Support mental, physical, and financial well-being
- **Do Well @UL (Weeks 3 & 7)** — Develop study skills and academic confidence
- **Reflect, Reset and Reach Out (Week 4)** — Reflect, reset and re-engage
- **Accessible Support (Weeks 1–7)** — Visible services, supports and resources available throughout the student journey.

A guiding principle of the new programme is to obtain and respond to student feedback as the programme progresses (during Weeks 1–7), which facilitates earlier and better intervention, retention, and progression.
One key change is presenting a 'UL Commuter Student' profile to our academic community to encourage a 'recognition and reduction' approach to the barriers those students face in their academic journey.
We want our students to know that they matter, that they belong, that they can do well, supported by their UL community that recognises and responds to their needs as they transition through their student journey.

# Aims and Objectives

## 7. Aim of the initiative

The aim of the F7W programme is to ensure a smooth transition for new entrants into third-level

education, in turn leading to improved retention, progression, and student performance.

## 8. Objective 1

To enhance student engagement and support, thereby increasing retention

### *Actions*

- Offer targeted activities, workshops, and support through:
    - F7W Hub as central physical resource
    - Social media platforms
    - Themed weeks that focus on key areas such as study skills, time management, health and wellbeing, academic advising, and civic engagement

- Development of a First Seven Weeks Interactive Handbook

### *Expected Outcome*

- Students feel welcome, supported, and informed from the start, fostering positive engagement with an adjustment to their university and learning experience.
- Increased student awareness of and interactive with support services.
- Higher levels of student satisfaction, and a sense of belonging within university community
- Continuous improvement of the programme through student feedback

## 9. Objective 2

To improve student retention and progression rates

### *Actions*

- Provide resources and activities that address common barriers faced by new students, such as study skills, time management and health and wellbeing.

### *Expected Outcome*

- Improved retention and progression rates as students feel more supported and better equipped to handle university life and therefore less likely to withdraw.

## 10. Objective 3

To foster a positive and supportive learning environment.

### *Actions*

- Engage students through various channels, including face to face interactions at the F7W Hub, social media engagement, and themed workshops and seminars.

- Encourage current students to share their experiences and advice with new students.

### *Expected Outcome*

- Enhanced student satisfaction

- Reduced feelings of isolation where students build connections with peers

- Improved student academic performance

- A supportive community that promotes student success through collaboration.

# Resourcing

## 11. How is the initiative resourced?

The F7W programme is resourced through institutional core financial support, which includes funding for the physical hub, social media platforms, and themed activities. The Centre for Transformative Learning runs the programme and engages students as staff who provide peer support and assistance across the campus to new students through their work as directional guides and as staff in the F7W Hub.

# 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)?

Monitoring and reporting of operations take place through day-to-day line management structures in the Centre for Transformative Learning, which operates within the Office of the Provost and Deputy President.

The programme is also reviewed and monitored through student feedback surveys, social media analytics, and staff input. SWOT analyses are conducted to assess the programme on an ongoing basis with a view to increasing effectiveness each iteration. The findings and recommendations are reported to Associate Vice-President Student Engagement and other stakeholders

Ultimately, the efficacy and impact of this initiative contribute to the retention and progression of undergraduate students. These measures are monitored and reported at faculty level through annual programme quality review reports, and at institutional level via annual institutional Performance Agreement reports

# 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?

In 2024, 71% 3,649 students surveyed responded affirmatively that the F7W programme helped them stay on their course

Although a direct causal relationship cannot be inferred as progression is multi-factorial, non-progression rates for new entrants in UL have fallen from 11% for the 2021/22 cohort to 8% for the 2023/24 cohort.

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

Positive student feedback is consistently received on the F7W directional guides and Hub staff. There has been increased footfall at the F7W Hub over time (from 2,157 in 2014/15 to 2,729 in 2024/25) and in 2025/26 a high level of social media engagement.

Further impact data is planned to be gathered each year by conducting a F7W Student Survey which included specific questions relevant to retention and progression.

**2025/26 social media stats**
Instagram posts — 475,999 views
TikTok posts — 195,000 views
Interactive Handbook — 923 visits

## Future Plans

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

Key improvements planned for 2026/27.

- Moving location to the new Student Life Building to increase visibility and accessibility.
- Tailoring of communication, resources and supports to commuter students. M
- Leading a UL Campus Roadshow to engage students on UL's North Campus
- Focusing in positive language emphasising empowerment rather than struggle when encouraging students to reach out to our Learning Centres, resources and supports.

## Additional Information

## 16. Additional information including relevant URLs

- First Seven Weeks @UL Programme
- **First Seven Weeks @UL Interactive Handbook**

