Student Engagement and Support Officers (SESO) (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

   Student Affairs Division

4. Focus

- First-year students
- New entrants
- All students
- Transition focus
- Institution-wide initiative

5. Theme

- Student wellbeing, experience, & success

Overview of Initiative

6. Briefly describe the initiative, with reference to

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

In 2021, a one-year SATLE-funded pilot initiative created four Student Engagement and Support Officer roles, aligned with each of the four faculties in UL. The initiative was a collaboration between the First Year Support Coordinator and faculty Assistant Deans for Academic Affairs, supported by the Student Engagement and Success Unit (Student Affairs, Library, and Centre for Transformative Learning).

The initiative aimed to contribute to improving non-progression rates of first year undergraduate students by providing an identifiable "first port of call" for students within their faculties to assist them in resolving any academic or personal issue they experience. It also sought to expand supports for student transition and engagement and to cultivate belonging beyond first year undergraduate students, as well as to enhance engagement and partnership between academic departments and student support services.

At the end of the pilot year, analysis of the impact of these roles on supporting students' engagement, on proactive identification of students at risk of non-progression, and on developing stronger cohesion between student supports and faculties resulted in the roles being made permanent in 2022.

Aims and Objectives

7. Aim of the initiative

The aim of the Student Engagement and Support Officers is to provide full-time undergraduate students with an identifiable “first port of call” within their faculty to assist them in resolving any academic or personal issue they experience to support timely progression through their studies.

8. Objective 1

To proactively identify and support students at risk of not realising their full academic potential, in collaboration with faculty and support staff.

Actions

- Creation of referral pathways between faculty staff and professional support services, and the SESO team, to address students’ personal or academic issues of concern in a timely and coordinated manner.
- Proactive outreach through faculty-specific initiatives, weekly drop-ins and social media campaigns.
- Proactive reach-out to students via processing formal exit requests, and monitoring of deficient grades and repeat exam reports.
- Tracking of service engagement data to identify repeat trends, issues and peak times of concern.
- Annual feedback meeting where faculty and dedicated Student Engagement and Support Officers review the previous academic year activities and impact.

Expected Outcome

- Early identification of at-risk students through streamlined communication.
- Reduced duplication of effort due to coordinated interventions.
- Consistent support experience across faculties through team-based approach

- Improved student outcomes and retention through integrated academic and personal support
- Faster access to specialised help
- Predictive insights that allow for proactive planning for future students
- Continuous improvement through reflection on successes and gaps
- Strengthened collaboration between SESOs, faculty and support services

9. Objective 2

To advise and support students so that they feel empowered to make appropriate choices concerning their engagement and progression in higher education.

Actions

- 1:1 meeting with students to assist each student in identifying the best course of action, help them plan their next step and, where necessary, refer to relevant support services.
- Provision of expert knowledge of options and opportunities that are available to students.

Expected Outcome

- Increased student awareness of available supports
- High engagement rates as students feel comfortable accessing help in informal settings
- Student-informed strategies as feedback highlights evolving needs and priorities
- Personalised guidance that matches students' academic and personal needs
- Clear action plans provided to students, which reduces uncertainty and indecision
- Direct conversations help students feel supported and capable of managing challenges
- Timely referrals and planning improve academic and personal success and improve retention and progression rates.

10. Objective 3

To create, coordinate and project manage initiatives designed to support students to develop their sense of identity and belonging as they transition and engage with university life.

Actions

- Weekly "Coffee & Chats Wellbeing Café" is held in conjunction with the Chaplaincy Team to provide an informal opportunity for students to discuss any concerns they have and meet with like-minded students.

- Production of "A Breath of UL" Podcast — this podcast series was produced by the SESO team and spotlights people from different walks of University life, who have a role in enhancing the student experience.

- Development of the "Be MindfUL" Programme — a unique peer awareness initiative designed to foster a culture of understanding, empathy, and connection among UL students.

Expected Outcome

- Reduced feelings of isolation where students build social connections with peers in a relaxed and welcoming environment

- Improved emotional wellbeing

- Greater emotional resilience due to having opportunities to share experiences with other students

- Enhanced sense of belonging by increasing student participation in initiatives organised by the SESO team

- Improved communication channels due to the breakdown of barriers between students and staff and providing a modern, accessible platform for sharing information.

- Early identification of concerns by SESO team at informal events

- Increased awareness of support services

- Improved self-awareness

Resourcing

11. How is the initiative resourced?

The Student Engagement and Support Officers are four permanent mainstreamed roles within the Student Affairs Division.

An annual operational budget is allocated to the team to allow for development of engagement initiatives.

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)?

As this is a mainstreamed service, monitoring and reporting of operations takes place through day-to-day line management structures. The Student Engagement and Support Officers report directly to the Student Support and Development Manager, who in turn reports to the Director, Student Affairs.

Annual reports are presented and discussed with the relevant faculty to share information on their specific experiences and to identify programmes and/or cohorts of students that require more targeted support.

Ultimately, the efficacy and impact of this service 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?

Year-on-year increase in individual students engaging with the service. 1,813 engaged in 2024/25, representing a 23% increase from a baseline of 1,472 in 2021/22.

While sole or direct cause and effect cannot be inferred, as retention is a multi-factorial issue, 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?

The SESO team consistently receives a high volume of feedback from students who have engaged with the service. This feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and it reflects the positive impact that the team has on individual students with respect to the foundational support required to enable ongoing engagement.

Further impact data is planned to be gathered via student focus groups and a survey of academic and support staff before the end of 2025/26.

Future Plans

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

Drawing on learning from the Policy Forum on Student Progression, the team plans to develop an early intervention pilot project across faculties. The project will bring together data from the virtual learning environment and other identifiers such as assessment results and module attendance to create a stepped model approach of support options for students.

A digital Case Management System is being implemented within the Student Affairs Division in

2026 which will offer enhanced reporting capacity and processes to better identify students at risk of not progressing within their course of study.

Additional Information

16. Additional information including relevant URLs

- Student Engagement and Support Officers | University of Limerick
- Podcasts | University of Limerick
- Be MindfUL | University of Limerick
- Coffee and Chats: Wellbeing Cafe | University of Limerick

