



Student Retention Policy

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1 Introduction

1.1 At a time of great global change the European Commission have been consistent and resolute in the advice to Member States in that they need to continue to invest in higher education systems. In particular three main areas of critical importance have been identified :

- access to higher education
- flexible pathways and
- student retention¹

The focus of this policy document is student retention.

1.2 At a national level Irish higher education aims to:

- widen participation to include those previously excluded
- leverage the traditionally high value we place on education
- prepare students for the job opportunities that come with economic development and
- deliver knowledge and learning of lasting cultural and social significance²

1.3 However higher education faces many challenges and in particular the difficulties students can encounter with the transition into higher education. It is important that higher education providers address these challenges in supporting students on their journey into and through higher education.³

1.4 This student retention policy has been prepared in an attempt to address and further understand the issues affecting the challenges around retention. In developing the policy consultation has taken place with relevant stakeholders together with a review of relevant literature and a particular focus on evidence based research.⁴

¹ Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014.

² National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 Report of the Strategy Group January 2011.

³ Transitions The Transition from Second to Third level education in Ireland: considerations, perspectives and proposed actions from the Institute of Technology sector – IOTI.

⁴ Galway – Mayo Institute of Technology, Academic Council Meeting, 15th March 2013.

2 Definition of terms

2.1 In the first instance there is a need for greater clarity in definitions both at the level of national steering documents and definitions used for statistical purposes. For example a 'completion rate' may refer in some countries to the percentage of students that enter a programme and complete it several years later, while in other countries only the student cohort in the final year of a programme is considered.

2.2 There are a variety of terms used in the discussion on retention. Terms such as retention, completion, progression, attrition and many more are often used in documents and during discussions on this topic. The following definitions are based on national legislation and local experiences.

2.2.1 Retention may be defined as the ability of the Institute to retain students so that they can progress through the different stages of their programme of study and ultimately graduate with an award.

- In GMIT, at institute level, first year retention is measured as the presence of students on March 1st, excluding those who re-entered via CAO, who were registered, full-time, new first time, in year 1 on the March 1st census date in the previous year. This is aligned to the non-progression rate included by the HEA in its sectoral and institutional profiles⁵. Should the HEA change their methodology then the institute will amend this measure to reflect any such change.
- At a programme level, GMIT captures retention in terms of students passing (P) all their examinations as a percentage of students registered (R) on the programme of study – P/R %. This is further adjusted to record students progressing carrying (C) modules - (P+C)/R.

2.2.2 “Completion rate” for a programme of education and training means the ratio that the number of enrolled learners who complete the programme bears to the number of enrolled learners who commenced the programme.⁶

⁵ Higher Education System Performance First Report 2014-2016 Volume 2: Institutional and Sectoral Profiles 2011-2012, Report of the Higher Education Authority
http://hea.ie/sites/default/files/evaluation_framework_short_2011-12.pdf

⁶ Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, Part 1

2.2.3 Progression may be defined as the advancement to the next stage of the programme as determined by the progression and awards board.⁷

- The HEA calculate their progression statistics from the data they extract from the Student Record System. Specifically they look at student registrations on the 1st March and again they look at the same student registrations 12 months later whereby they can then focus on the issue of non-progression rates over that period. These are the figures reported for higher education providers in Ireland.⁸

2.2.4 Attrition may be defined as the reduction in the student population as a result of unsuccessful examination performance and departures from higher education.

3 Purpose of the student retention policy

3.1 Improving student retention is a complex and necessary task.

3.2 Research shows that students leave higher education for a complex variety of reasons and it is evident that non-completion is rarely determined by a single issue but more a combination of personal, institutional, social and external factors.

3.2.1 The diverse student population, many from non-traditional backgrounds, widening participation and different levels of preparedness for third level study, can affect transition to higher education and the impact on students' experience and retention rates⁹.

3.2.2 Transition to higher education can be influenced by several factors, including academic and social involvement¹⁰, family background, peer group, socioeconomic status, and academic preparation.¹¹

Interpretation.<http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/2012/a2812.pdf>

⁷ Academic Code of Practice No.3 Student Assessment :Marks & Standards Academic Year 2014/2015

⁸ A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education Institutions, 2010/11 to 2011/12
Report by the Higher Education Authority 2014.

⁹ What Makes Them Succeed? Entry, progression and graduation in Computer Science. Journal of Further & Higher Education. Boyle, R., Carter, J. & Clark, M. 2002.

¹⁰ "First Things First: Developing Academic Competence in the First Year of College*." Research in Higher Education. Reason, R., P. Terenzini, et al. (2006).

¹¹ A Typology of Student Engagement for American Colleges and Universities. Research in Higher Education. Pike, G. R. & Kuh, G. D. 2005.

- 3.3 In Ireland, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) ¹² reported the proportion of new entrants in 2010/11 who did not progress one year later was 16%, across all sectors and National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) levels.
- 3.3.1 The rates of non-progression vary strongly according to the NFQ level, ranging from 31%/28% at levels 6/7 to between 4% and 17% at level 8.
- 3.3.2 Rates also differ considerably according to the sector, ranging from 24% in an institute of technology to 9% in a university and 4% in other colleges.
- 3.3.3 The strong link between prior educational attainment and successful progression is evident in the HEA study. Educational attainment is a very strong factor influencing whether or not a new entrant progresses beyond the first year of their course of study. Regardless of the sector or level that a student enters, the study finds that students with lower leaving certificate points are less likely to progress to the following academic year.
- 3.4 The Institute recognises the need to address and continue to improve on student retention so as to ensure a positive experience for all students and for the Institute in terms of its reputation and the utilisation of resources.
- 3.5 Effective student retention efforts will need the support of all staff and will need to become embedded within the culture of the Institute. The ultimate goal of a retention effort is improved higher educational experiences for all.
- 3.6 Engaging in a systematic and comprehensive retention effort should lead to an increase in graduation rates and improvements in annual retention rates.
- 3.7 Addressing retention requires a coherent strategy which recognises the holistic nature of this issue, the complete student experience and the contribution of all sections of the Institute in an integrated way.
- 3.8 A high standard of education is paramount and a strong retention effort will continue to protect and uphold these standards.

4 Key Principles

- 4.1 Retention of students and the enhancement of a quality student experience is a key principle for GMIT in fulfilling its responsibility as a higher education provider.
- 4.2 Retention is the responsibility of all staff.

¹² A Study of Progression in Irish Higher Education Institutions, 2010/11 to 2011/12
Report by the Higher Education Authority 2014.

- 4.3 There needs to be a particular focus on first year retention while recognising retention at all stages is important.
- 4.4 Further and extensive research must continue to be carried out in an attempt to understand the reasons for poor retention. In this regard the Institute needs to adopt an evidence based approach in focusing and targeting retention effort. This must take place at Institute level and permeate throughout the organisation including all academic units.
- 4.5 Data monitoring and analysis is required at a granular level for each programme to each module, mode of study and cohort of students.
- 4.6 The monitoring and reporting of completion and retention for all programmes in the Institute must be a priority. This should enable a detailed examination of the effectiveness of different initiatives. The sharing of experiences both positive and negative should take place supported by appropriate staff development related to retention initiatives.

5 Implementation Strategies

- 5.1 The implementation strategies are considered under the following four heading: activities prior to entry, activities which are provided to support students in transition (induction) and beyond, curriculum development and delivery to meet the needs of diverse student groups and the development of staff expertise and awareness¹³.
- 5.2 Activities prior to entry.
- 5.2.1 At pre-entry stage individuals interested in higher education should receive accurate information on the different programmes on offer and the level of commitment (time and financial) required so that they can be successful in higher education. Information about academic units and programmes of study provided in the prospectus, at open days and in our admissions policy should be accurate and lead to realistic student expectations.
- 5.2.2 Readiness and suitability for particular programmes of study should be addressed. In this regard the Institute needs to ensure that marketing and promotion takes place in such a way that prospective student expectations match the reality of what the actual experience will be. Wrong programme choice is one of the main reasons as to why students

¹³ Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition – The STAR (Student Transition and Retention) Project www.ulster.ac.uk/star

leave in the early stages of their studies. Therefore the Institute should ensure that prospective students are well informed on the different programmes of study available.

- 5.2.3 The Institute must be prepared to consider the impact of admitting large numbers of students with an ambition for high retention.
 - 5.2.4 Collaborations with second level education providers, further education providers and other education providers should continue and be developed further so as to ensure a smooth transition into higher education at GMIT.
 - 5.2.5 The foundation certificate programme in GMIT should continue to be delivered so as to provide prospective students with a stepping stone into higher education.
- 5.3 Activities which are provided to support students in transition (induction) and beyond.
- 5.3.1 All students should receive a comprehensive induction both at institute and programme level. There needs to be a particular focus on getting to know the environment, other students and the staff of the Institute. At this stage there is an opportunity for the Institute to nurture a sense of belonging in the student while encouraging student engagement at a very early stage in academic and other Institute activities¹⁴. There should be a follow up “Induction” session with all first year students after their first month in the Institute forming part of the first year experience.
 - 5.3.2 Registration and all such related student services should take place within the first week of arrival but at latest within one month of arrival so that all students can gain access to the Institute and Institute services on a timely basis.
 - 5.3.3 All students should be assigned a personal tutor/mentor and be familiar with the teaching team and the other support services. The personal tutor must have an opportunity to meet with the students weekly either individually or in a group as appropriate. Priority should be given to such meetings in the first semester. This will allow students raise any issues that may be of concern and the tutor can offer the necessary advice. There may be an opportunity for the tutor to address issues such as the importance of good attendance and other academic issues can often be clarified at these meetings. In situations where there are more difficult issues to resolve the student should be guided to student supports and student services.

¹⁴ What Works? Student Retention & Success Summary Report Professor Liz Thomas March 2012

- 5.4 Curriculum development and delivery to meet the needs of diverse student groups.
- 5.4.1 The curriculum should be relevant, appropriate and inform students in relation to their aspirations early on in the programme. It should be reviewed regularly in line with the Institute's quality assurance processes.¹⁵ Excellence in delivery should be acknowledged and celebrated with such lecturers encouraged to disseminate good practice within GMIT and beyond.
- 5.4.2 Teaching and learning should be such that fosters high levels of student engagement leading to persistence, success and ultimately graduation. Clearly students are required to put time and effort into their studies. This student effort combined with an active involvement in academic and social activities brings persistence and a desire for success in higher education. High quality appropriate teaching serves to strengthen the connection of the student to the Institute.
- 5.4.3 High quality education together with high expectations for students, professionalism, collegiality, and respect by and for all can foster educational resilience where students attain academic and social success despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities.¹⁶
- 5.4.4 Additional teaching and support for disciplines identified as particularly challenging should be provided.
- 5.4.5 Creating a culture where students engage with each other and support each other in the learning process can help the first year students establish a firm foundation for their studies in that year and thereafter through to graduation.
- 5.5 Development of staff expertise and awareness
- 5.5.1 In a changing environment staff need regular supports to cope adequately with the changing needs of students. Purposeful staff development strategies should be in place to support staff in fulfilling their role. Staff should recognise that expertise in guiding and supporting students is important. Often academic staff are the first point of contact for students needing support. It is important therefore that all such staff are fully aware of the policies, procedures and supports available to such students. Students who find themselves in difficult situations should be

¹⁵ Academic Code of Practice: No.2 Validation, Monitoring & Review.

¹⁶ Fostering Resilience - Expecting All Students to Use Their Minds and Hearts Well Martin L. Krovetz 2008.

encouraged to seek the necessary advice and support from the different functions within the Institute.

- 5.5.2 Students who may be at risk of leaving the Institute or performing poorly in their examinations should be identified as soon as possible and the necessary supports put in place at the very outset. It is possible in some cases to identify such students on admission/ transfer and others through their contact with their tutors and lecturers.
 - 5.5.3 In situations where students plan to leave the Institute (withdraw) it is important that these decisions are fully informed decisions and that the necessary consultations have taken place with the academic staff, counsellors and heads of department. The Institute needs to be fully aware of the reasons for withdrawals and all the necessary documentation needs to be completed.
 - 5.5.4 Data collection, analysis, reporting and review of retention indicators (student withdrawal forms, unsuccessful examination performance and drop-outs) should occur on a regular basis. This analysis should always include prior year comparatives and seek to establish patterns for different student cohorts such as second level entrants, mature entrants, international students, postgraduate students etc. The Office of the Registrar will be responsible for this statistical compilation and review providing information to and receiving information from the programme boards throughout the Institute.
 - 5.5.5 Implementing effective retention initiatives should be reviewed, amended and updated on a regular basis. Staff should share their experience through seminars, workshops, papers, newsletters etc. organised through the centre for educational development. What works in one department may not work in another but the expertise and experiences built up in staff should be acknowledged and shared throughout the Institute.
- 5.6 These implementation strategies are detailed further in terms of responsibilities, resources required and status in the Retention Policy Draft Action Plan 2014.

6 Retention Targets & Resourcing

- 6.1 In order to achieve appropriate focus and targeting of effort the Institute will aim for a first year retention target of 71% and a target of 88% for subsequent years (See definition of Retention 2.2.1). These targets are based on students progressing or graduating with an award.
- 6.2 A clear focus on and review of student retention initiatives in the context of these targets will allow the Institute evaluate the success (or otherwise) of these initiatives at an Institute and programme level.
- 6.3 Specific actions adequately resourced will be required to effect change in this area and realise the Institute's ambition for high retention. The following is indicative of some requirements that need to be continually resourced if the Institute is to address retention in any meaningful way.
- Student Engagement & Retention Manager
 - School Liaison Officer
 - Marketing Officer
 - Careers Office
 - Learning Support
 - Counselling
 - PASS coordinators and leaders
 - First Year Experience materials & coordinators
 - Year Tutors / Mentors
 - Staff Training & Support – Centre for Educational Development
 - Student Services
 - Student Supports
 - Learning Centres