CHAPTER 12

Retention in Ireland's Higher Education Institutions

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As the access story unfolds, various plots and sub plots emerge in the narrative. But not all who gain access complete the journey. In this chapter we will discuss how retention is linked to access and equality, review what the research indicates about student retention, completion and persistence in general and then conclude with an outline of what the research says about retention and specific groups of non-traditional students.

Retention as an Access and Equality Issue?

An explicit link between access, equity and retention was made by Skilbeck (2001) in his influential policy paper on access. Student retention has in recent years become a key performance indicator for HE systems. According to the European Council (EC 2014, p. 14), in a decision reached in 2010:

> In a social and economic environment where skills and competences acquired and refined through higher education are becoming more and more important . . . it is a societal imperative to expand opportunities to higher education as broadly as possible, by providing, 'equal opportunities for access to quality education, as well as equity in treatment,

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> including adapting provisions to individuals' needs', so that 'equitable education and training systems . . . are aimed at providing opportunities, access, treatment and outcomes that are independent of socio-economic background and other factors which may lead to educational disadvantage'. (EC 2014, p. 14)

This suggestion that retention is also an equity issue is usefully elaborated upon by Gazeley and Aynsley (2012, p. 15):

> Although retention is a key performance indicator it is actually a matter of social justice to ensure that those brought into higher education as part of the widening participation agenda are actively protected from the psychological, financial and/or emotional costs of non-completion in those cases where it is not a positive choice made by the individual concerned.

As pointed out by Quinn (2013a, p. 60), 'drop-out' is limiting to focus on student characteristics and institutional practices as retention is influenced by social factors and the socio-economic background of the students as well as by HE policies and practices. Indeed, the existence of national policies on HE as well as the adoption of concrete measures are vital steps on the way to reaching the envisaged goals of successfully widening participation in HE (EC 2014, p. 29). Access is seen then as a process on getting in, staying on and moving forward. As we have noted in Chap. 5 we only know part of this story in Ireland and understanding student persistence is one of those things that, despite the fact it is widely discussed, is not well understood.

The International Context: Terms, Theories and Measurement

Across Europe there is little coherence in terms of framing retention. The term drop-out is not used as it denotes a negative event or negative student experience—it is often not so and frequently it is a positive decision not to proceed. Across Europe a variety of terms are used to describe retention including completion, persistence, results and continuation. All have slightly different meanings and all refer to slightly different realities. For instance, in an international comparative study of retention commissioned by the UK National Audit Office (Van Stolk et al. 2007) noted that in Ireland the various ways of calculating completion, graduation and

survival rates often yield confusing and apparently contradictory evidence. This is widespread across Europe and behind the seeming clarity of headline statistics on retention lies a surprising degree of methodological and conceptual disagreement and a degree of murkiness.

Both the European Union and the OECD (2007) give statistics for retention and having looked at the ways in which countries arrive at their statistics it is clear that it is very difficult to know if they actually compare like with like (RANLHE 2010). Across Europe, the average rates of survival in HE are approximately 70 per cent—with some countries, and some institutions and some disciplines, departing significantly from those figures on either the plus or negative side. In addition, politics and optics complicate the amount of transparency that is tolerated. There are different completion rates for part-time and full-time students and for entrants with different qualifications. Rates also differ widely depending on the course. There is some evidence that some groups of non-traditional students tend to drop-out more than traditional students, although this may be connected as much to the practices of the institutions that recruit them as on the characteristics of the students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Much of the literature on retention draws on Vincent Tinto, whose "interactionist model" has been an important international reference point for studying student retention in HE. More recently, Tinto (1993) has identified five conditions for student retention, such as expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning. First, students are more likely to persist when they are expected to succeed. Students who have been historically excluded from HE are affected positively by a climate of high expectations. Second, students are more likely to stay the course when academic, social and personal support is provided through mentoring, study groups or other integrated supports. Third, students are more likely to persist when frequent and timely feedback is given about their work. Fourth, students are more likely to persist when they are valued as members of the college community. Frequent and quality contact with staff and other students are independent predictors of student persistence. This matters a great deal in the first year of study when student engagements may be tenuous and the commitment to the learning project is being established. Fifth, students are more likely to persist in

environments that foster learning. Students who are actively involved in learning are more likely to learn and, as a result, more likely to stay (Tinto 1993).

Tinto's model is based on the experiences and outcomes of students in the United States and does not specifically address 'non-traditional' students and cannot be treated as a universally applicable model. One critique offered by Yorke (2004, p. 25) cites evidence from a range of studies to the effect that 'factors extraneous to the students' experience in HE exert more influence on older students than they do on younger students, and that these are not strongly represented in Tinto's model.

Working in the UK context, Reay et al. (2005) draw on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field to understand and explain student experience in HE. The following extract summarises a number of key points:

> the concept of habitus emphasises the enduring influence of a range of contexts, familial, peer group, institutional and class culture, and their subtle, often indirect, but still pervasive influence on (HE) choices. It foregrounds the power of implicit and tacit expectations, affective responses and aspects of cultural capital such as confidence and entitlement, often marginalised in academic research. (Reay et al. 2005, p. 27)

Social and cultural experiences impact on access and retention. Students from some non-traditional backgrounds experience HE as though they are 'fish out of water' according to Bourdieu. Their HE lives are influenced by factors such as finance, family background, employment history and the ethnic mix of the college. This awareness of the impact of cultural capital and habitus can be extended to retention. Reay et al. (2005, pp. 28–34) argue that when habitus encounters a field with which it is unfamiliar, the resulting disjunctions can generate important change but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty. It has been argued that a close match between the cultural capital of the institution and the student is a good predictor of retention (Longden 2004). This poses particular challenges for non-traditional student groups. The tacit knowledge of the student in other words, if it differs significantly from that of the institution, increases the tendency to drop-out (Thomas 2002, p. 431).

In looking for remedies to this it is important not to focus on deficits but rather focus on changing institutions to facilitate new non-traditional students' success. Others (Thomas 2002) focus on the extent to which

institutions are challenging as habitus informs practice in unconscious ways. Thomas concludes that a culture of inclusiveness and diversity is part of the solution and is likely to enhance retention (Thomas 2002, p. 431).

Incorporating Student Success

An increasing number of writers and researchers are choosing to concentrate more on the idea of student 'success' (Yorke and Longden 2008). The recent Irish study by the HEA has taken this approach (Liston et al. 2016). Others (Layer et al. 2002, p. 15) stress that success is the 'prime focus of the higher education student experience and seeks to recognise achievement rather than "failure", whereas retention places limits on the nature of higher education given the measures used and the assumptions of consecutive study'. Yorke (2004, p. 19) develops the argument in a more sociological direction when he states that retention is a 'supply-side' concept, which is important for institutional managers as well as the government and its agencies. In contrast, student success is a judgement made from the student's perspective. This focus on success seems to be gaining increasing emphasis and it could be argued that success may be about more than retention and that retention is not the only kind of success. However the inclusion of the term 'success' can allow a more productive approach to exploring students' subjective experiences of HE (see also Crowther et al. (2010) for similar arguments linked to adult education).

Retention in Irish Higher Education

The past decades have seen major changes in Irish HE (as earlier chapters have illustrated) that have impacted profoundly on the task of providing a successful learning experience for students. Healy et al. (1999) was the first research report funded by the Council of Directors of the Institutes of Technology and called attention to the significant levels of non-completion across three IoTs. Since than others (Eivers et al. 2002) looked specifically at the IoT sector and other reports broadened the research base to include all the HE institutions, including colleges of education. The HEA research report (Mooney et al. 2010) updates a number of the other historical studies (Baird 2002; Healy et al. 1999; Eivers et al. 2002; Morgan et al. 2001) and provides a new benchmark and baseline against which future progress will be measured.

Enrolments are up 14 per cent in 5 years (2010–2015); full-time newly enrolled students number 41,400 (a 7 per cent increase over 5 years). The report looks at how many of the 41,400 are still in college a year later taking the dates of 1 March to 1 March the following year. The most recent research (Liston et al. 2016) looks at success rates and updates earlier key reports (Mooney et al. 2010) that looked at drop-outs. These reports choose to commence 'counting' on 1 March towards the end of the first year of study. This alerts us to a problem with the overall outcomes. In other words, the start date for collecting data is 6 months after enrolment. There is an inbuilt fairness in this 1 March date that anyone in management will recognise as it allows time for students and the system to bed down, so to speak. It is however more likely linked to the date at which the institutions submit student numbers for funding by government. The problem arises as the students are already in the HE institution from September to March—a total of 6 months. By our own research (RANLHE 2010), we have found that the 4 per cent estimated by the HEA report as not progressing in the November to March period is broadly accurate, if slightly on the low side. But if we start counting from September we find that an additional 5 per cent leave in the September-to-November period. Some few move to other colleges, and though difficult to track they are not a good reason for ignoring the 4 or 5 per cent who leave (September–November) and the accumulation of even 10 per cent who are already on the exit route by March following first enrolment. This sets a significant challenge for HE as the numbers leaving persist in spite of imaginative and useful interventions by the system. Figures that accurately state the first drop-out figure is 16 per cent across the board may need to be 'adjusted' by a very significant 10 percentage, when the first 6 months in HE are included. By any count, an average of 25 per cent drop-out from September of first year to near the end of second year is a frequently hidden statistic.

A pattern of widely varying retention rates between individual institutions and between the universities and IoTs has emerged from a number of studies examining completion and non-completion rates among third level students in Ireland. The most comprehensive research on the topic discovered a high completion rate in universities, at 83 per cent, and a relatively low completion rate of 57 per cent in IoTs (Eivers et al. 2002; Morgan et al. 2001). This may be significant as historically the IoT sector

has attracted a higher proportion of students from a working class background and is seen as being 'on the front line in the widening participation agenda' (OECD 2004, p. 32). However, a more recent study suggests that there is now no significant difference in the completion rate for full-time courses of study in the IoT when compared to Irish universities. Kinsella and Roe (2006) estimated that 87 per cent of degree students and 70 per cent of diploma students finished their course in 2004.

The most recent HEA research (Liston et al. 2016) has moved the debate about retention towards the concept of success and states that the concept of successful participation is now the fundamental premise of Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications, which aims to ensure that the learner is 'able to enter and successfully participate in a programme . . . leading to an award' (Liston et al. 2016, p. 5). Data are now available on an annual basis giving the first- and second-year students' views of their HE experience and this is expected to enhance the evidential base for analysing student experience (Liston et al. 2016, p. 5).

Retention and Non-traditional Students

So what do we know specifically about access students? Researchers who have examined retention in relation to social class have disagreed on how important socio-economic background is to the likelihood of completion (Eivers et al. 2002; Carpenter et al. 1999). Little sustained attention has been given to other types of 'non-traditional' students in this body of research. Similarly, there is conflicting evidence about the importance of gender as a factor in student retention and withdrawal. However, there does appear to be more conclusive evidence that higher prior educational attainment has a positive impact on who 'stays the course'. Subject choice is also important and students studying science, mathematics and computing are less likely to complete their course and those who enter high status professional education such as medicine and dentistry are the most likely to finish their degrees.

Across all sectors, 16 per cent did not progress from 2012/13 to 2013/14 to the second year. Of course these rates varied widely from 26 per cent and 28 per cent at NFQ Levels 6 and 7 to 17, 11 per cent at Level 8 in universities and institutes of technology (Liston et al. 2016, p. 17). Prior educational achievement remains a good predictor and the

Leaving Certificate is a strong indicator of success. The higher the prior achievement, the more persistent the student is likely to be (Liston et al. 2016, p. 19). Some subjects are particularly prone to high attrition rates, especially Construction Studies with fall-out at 29 per cent, but Education has a very high success rate of 95 per cent. In universities, Computer Studies have the highest level of non-progression (Liston et al. 2016, p. 23) and in the Health Care field 18 per cent did not progress (Liston et al. 2016, p. 23). In professional-oriented courses, medicine has the lowest level of drop-out at 2 per cent, while architecture has the highest at 22 per cent.

Overall and in all sectors, females are more successful at moving on to the second year of study. Mature students at Level 6 and 7 are more successful than under 23-year-olds, except in universities where mature students are not doing as well as the under 23-year-olds. One category has the widest divergence between males and females: at Level 8 in IoTs, only 59 per cent of males with points in the 205–250 range progress compared to 90 per cent of females. It seems that females fare better even when their CAO points are at the lower entry levels. However, this is not matched in universities at level 8 (Liston et al. 2016 p. 31). In universities when female students score 255–300 CAO points, only 60 per cent progress compared to males who have a 90 per cent success rate. It is hard to extrapolate from such data any solid findings relevant to access groups, although we know that advantaged students tend to achieve higher points.

Non-Irish students in IoTs are more at risk. Of particular interest is the socio-economic group to which a student belongs. Farmers and Higher Professionals are least likely to drop-out (only 10 per cent leave) and socio-economic groups such as Others, Gainfully Employed and Unknown are most at risk of departure rate of 17. Overall, across all the socio economic groups (SEG) there is a small increase since 2007/2008 in the number of students who are not progressing (Liston et al. 2016, p. 35). It may be because of the economic decline in construction as in that period (since 2007) non-completion in construction-related studies has increased three fold to 16 per cent.

Mature students account for 8.5 per cent of all new entrants in IoTs, while in universities the figure is a very low 4 per cent. In spite of targets set and measures introduced over a long number of years, the widening participation and increasing access this is a very modest success indeed (Liston et al. 2016, p. 32).

What Have We Learnt?

The HEA in its most recent report attempts to understand and interpret these findings and the variations associated with SEGs, gender, prior educational attainment, and then by educational sector and course chosen. In this interpretive process there is a relative or maybe even a dramatic absence of Irish sources of analysis that might illuminate the situation. In the final chapter of the report it relies almost entirely on a set of studies that refer to the United Kingdom and Australia (Jocey Quinn, Liz Thomas, Mantz Yorke, Bernard Longden, Vincent Tinto and others), so the question is whether the situation as understood in other countries applies to Ireland is not asked. Qualitative and indeed narrative research would allow the Irish HEA to assert with a bit more confidence why the situation they measure is so. Otherwise we are left with figures and numbers. Accurate and useful as they are, we have no way of asking why do these particular students stay the course or leave the programme with all the economic, social and personal consequences that leaving may have.

The question, why do some students stay and others leave, is one of those really complex questions as so many issues—institutional, personal and especially broader environmental—impact on the ambition of the student to succeed. A matrix of factors, over which students very often have little control, interact with one another making success for many a challenging experience.

Mathematics and Success: Post hoc ergo propter hoc

The HEA report (Mooney et al. 2010) is very careful to map the useful connections between Leaving Certificate points, mathematics and English grades on the one hand and success in HE on the other. However, as those who make a study of these matters, we must be even more careful here. In spite of multivariate analysis conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on the HEA data, the view is equally convincing from other studies that the Leaving Certificate results when linked with success in HE may be an example of the logical fallacy well-known to Classical scholars as *post hoc ergo propter hoc*—just because something goes before another it may not be the cause.

We do know that grades in mathematics are likely to be indicators of social background (socio-economic and social class) and even of the school the student attended. There is a temptation to favour allocating extra CAO points for mathematics or supporting better mathematics

teaching in schools, neither of which I want to criticise except to say that allocating places or predicting success on the basis of points and mathematics may be a shortcut to saying that those who are advantaged will maintain their advantage in HE. We know this for many years already. There are two ways of stating the implications of this, one is that educational and social disadvantage are reproduced and maintained through HE (but we have known this since Bowles and Gintis [1976]). Or we can assert that there is a connection between the schools where over 60 per cent of students do higher level mathematics (of these 78 are fee-paying) and success at college (Lynch 2010). We also know from many years of policy, practice and research that interventions and encouragements of this kind are generally availed by the middle-classes in a way that is out of proportion to their numbers in society. Disadvantage is also maintained though HE (Fleming & Murphy 2002). So that any intervention that allocates bonus points to mathematics grades in the Leaving Certificate may be a way of rewarding social and economic advantage disguised as a laudable intervention that really rewards and encourages students to achieve high marks in mathematics. Addressing retention and progression through the Leaving Certificate points system must be matched by public policies that address inequalities in the social and educational system. It is not new to stress that access and retention is a task that needs to be addressed by the entire educational system starting in primary (and possibly earlier).

What Do Students Say about Persistence and Leaving?

A great deal. But let us select one item that is right at the top of their concerns and that has very little to do with mathematics, computers, the library or the lecturer. As young people in the transition to adulthood, we have in our HE system tens of thousands of emerging adults preoccupied with many of the tasks that society is happy for them to be engaged with—what will I study? How will I emerge from this as a teacher, lawyer and so on? But the central and personal concern is this: who is my friend? Who am I now in this environment? And who is going to be my ally in the new learning and developmental trajectory? We also have increasing numbers of mature students negotiating life transitions in HE who have similar and other concerns including can I juggle my various social and family commitments with study? Will this help me arrive at better work; what does this mean I am becoming? If the student finds it difficult to negotiate

a satisfactory answer to these questions, it may become a dominating preoccupation. We suggest that if we ignore the centrality of these concerns we will miss what is central to students, traditional and non-traditional, and what is key to their success and progression. An enhanced and progressive policy and practice of creating, supporting and sustaining communities of learners will be a key intervention; we believe it will enhance retention.

In an EU research project, non-traditional students have been interviewed in three Irish HEIs using biographical methods to find out why they stay or go. We have also been able to interview a sample of students who have not continued (RANLHE 2010a, 2010b). Students do not drop-out easily. It is a huge and troubling experience that they do not take lightly. A number of factors are crucial in influencing whether or not students progress or not. A coalition of events comes to bear on what is a determined attempt to succeed but students are confronted with vulnerabilities around every corner. Finance, the ability to select a course or programme that is satisfying and engages the students aspirations, goals and interests and other less-easily addressed problems such as health, are all factors that are not new to anyone here. One factor is particularly striking and needs to be understood. The system has made many important improvements over the past decade. We do not want to itemise all of them but they include changes in grading systems, open days, access courses, modular degrees, semesterisation, other structural changes and a range of Officers, from Access and Mature Student to Counsellors and Tutor Support that have different titles in the various colleges. However, the system, in institutionalising many good ideas into programme, makes very little attempt to find out how the student experiences them and how college is experienced by the student. Once this was raised at a Faculty meeting in one of our own institutions and was greeted with a (loud) chorus that there is widespread use of 'student feedback'. Student feedback is important and also a system mechanism, usually a questionnaire, which asks questions, closed or open, on a Likert scale. This is however a limited form of student involvement. We need to listen in quite a different way to what students have to say and how they experience the learning environment of HE. This involves collecting not just their feedback questionnaires but their stories of struggle for success, retention, progression and sometimes non-completion. Do we really know how and why they walk away from what was a dream, an expectation that this would be a wonderful moment of recognition by the education system which they hold in high esteem?

In addition to this, when we talked to non-traditional students, whether young or mature, those who came through the access programmes were eloquent, insightful and benefited hugely from the firm collaborations, friendships and networks of support they were encouraged to form as part of their struggle for retention in college and universities. We are suggesting that each college could address this issues by restructuring either the first year or first semester so that those students who may feel less sure of the subject they have chosen and/or wish to move into the transitional space (West 1996) of HE more slowly and pay greater attention to their developmental needs might be given an option to undertake a more general modular semester along the lines of a 'taster menu'. This would emphasise a range of liberal arts and sciences with the experiences of collaborative and cooperative learning activities as central to the provision.

One finding that is emerging from the interviews with students who leave early and is in additional to the many complex factors that impact on their plans is that of mental health. It is a finding of our research in Irish HE that we do need to pay attention to the numbers of students who do not complete and who identify mental health issues as part of the equation. Other disabilities have been resourced with supporting structures and staff but this is, I believe, a new finding and needs to be addressed. So that at graduation when the academic leaders (still speaking in Latin) claim that they present these student 'in their knowledge and in their care', that they will know that this includes paying attention to more vulnerable students who find little of support in HE for their distress.

In a world that values and prioritises the market and the economy as giving meaning to almost everything, it would not be a surprise if interviewing students led to discussions about finance, careers and the economic benefits of HE. Let us get beyond this obvious agenda by saying that funding is a major (though not the top) priority for most students; the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) and other grants are necessary and key supports to the extent that without them most students would not make it at all. In addition, having surveyed all the mature students who graduated from Maynooth and interviewed a sample from Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), it is clear that a better job is not the most obvious benefit of HE. A highly paid, deeply satisfying job with major advances through the socio-economic ladder is not the reality. The family is the major beneficiary, and adults in particular tell of having more time for their families, less stress on

children and the social and cultural capital dividend that students are well aware of as they graduate. Having done this research (Fleming et al. 2010), the Irish family (at least for those who are successful at university) is a fully functioning and supportive unit. It supports successful students both emotionally and financially. For those less fortunate in terms of family support, they achieve their success in spite of their families. If career or job prospects are now diminished in the current economic climate, the family remains the main source of support and the beneficiary. In conclusion, the tasks set by earlier reports on retention have precipitated a wide range of system responses over the past decade. Many have been well received by students and have been successful in fostering a better learning environment. There is a great deal left to do.

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