

Improving Student Retention: Enhancing the First Year Experience through Group Work, Research and Presentation Workshops

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Abstract : Higher education is recognised as being of critical importance in Ireland and has been linked as a vital factor to national well-being. Statistics show that Ireland has one of the highest rates of higher education participation in Europe. However, student retention and progression, especially in Institutes of Technology, is becoming an issue as rates on non-completion rise. Both within Ireland and across Europe student retention is seen as a key performance indicator for higher education and with these increasing rates the Irish higher education system needs to be flexible and adapt to the situation it now faces. The author is a Programme Chair on a Level 6 full time undergraduate programme and experience to date has shown that the first year undergraduate students take some time to identify themselves as a group within the setting of a higher education institute. Despite being part of a distinct class on a specific programme some individuals can feel isolated as he or she take the first step into higher education. Such feelings can contribute to students eventually dropping out. This paper reports on an ongoing initiative that aims to accelerate the bonding experience of a distinct group of first year undergraduates on a programme which has a high rate of non-completion. This research sought to engage the students in dynamic interactions with their peers to quickly evolve a group sense of coherence. Two separate modules - a Research Module and a Communications module - delivered by the researcher were linked across two semesters. Students were allocated into random groups and each group was given a topic to be researched. There were six topics - essentially the six sub-headings on the DIT Graduate Attribute Statement. The research took place in a computer lab and students also used the library. The output from this was a document that formed part of the submission for the Research Module. In the second semester the groups then had to make a presentation of their findings where each student spoke for a minimum amount of time. Presentation workshops formed part of that module and students were given the opportunity to practice their presentation skills. These presentations were video recorded to enable feedback to be given. Although this was a small scale study preliminary results found a strong sense of coherence among this particular cohort and feedback from the students was very positive. Other findings indicate that spreading the initiative across two semesters may have been an inhibitor. Future challenges include spreading such Initiatives College wide and indeed sector wide.

Keywords : first year experience, student retention, group work, presentation workshops

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