

EXPLORING STUDENT PROGRESSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CONFERENCE REPORT AND
NEXT STEPS

Table of Contents

Background.....	4
Student Progression Rates: Overview and Key Findings	4
Themes arising from the Conference	6
Themes	7
Discussion	15
Glossary	17
References	19

Background

The HEA launched the 2021 higher education student progression data (progression of first-year undergraduate new entrants) at its conference ‘Exploring student progression in higher education’, on 29 February 2024 in the Croke Park Conference Centre.

The conference was organised to facilitate an exploration of student progression¹ nationally, to bridge the gap between data and policy, and to create a forum for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and stakeholders to share their knowledge, practice, insights, and learning.

Representatives attending the conference included policymakers, senior management from HEIs, academic, teaching, and professional staff, students, and employers. The perspectives of international speakers from the OECD and the UK, employers, academic, teaching, and professional staff, and students were shared at the conference following a HEA presentation on the 2021 student progression data and a Central Statistics Office (CSO) analysis of outcomes for new entrants who did not progress in 2021.

The purpose of this report is to present an overview of the key findings arising from the HEA and CSO analyses above, and of the feedback provided by conference participants during and following the conference to inform next steps.

Student Progression Rates: Overview and Key Findings

The HEA presentation on student progression rates drew from the findings of the HEA [analysis of non-progression among higher education new entrants in Ireland, from 2016/17 to 2021/22](#) (formally reported on in February 2024 (HEA, 2024)). The analysis considered various student and course characteristics, including National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) level, Field of Study, Institution, and Gender, and identified student cohorts with a higher likelihood of non-progression. In addition, an overview of the findings of an analysis undertaken by the CSO on the employment and education outcomes for students who did not progress from year one into year two of higher education in 2021 (CSO, 2024) was provided at the conference. A summary of the key findings and trends that emerged from the data is provided below. A more in-depth exploration is available from the HEA and CSO analyses highlighted above.

The analysis undertaken by the HEA revealed considerable fluctuation in the rate of non-progression from 2016/17 to 2021/22, with a decline in 2019/20 (9%), followed by sharp increases in 2020/21 (12%) and 2021/22 (15%). Increases were reported across nearly all student groups for 2021/22, with younger new entrants, those with Leaving Certificate points between 400 and 550, and new entrants from areas of higher deprivation and who

¹ Non-progression rates measure the percentage of full-time first-year undergraduate new entrants who do not continue and progress in their studies in the following academic year ([HEA non-progression definition](#)).

had attended DEIS schools seeing the largest proportional increases in non-progression. Non-progression rates were highest amongst disadvantaged students and lowest amongst affluent students, and higher for males than females from 2016/17 to 2021/22, with a strong correlation reported for non-progression rates and Leaving Certificate points (the lower the Leaving Certificate points, the higher the non-progression rate) for this interval also.

An examination of progression rates by NFQ Level for 2021/22 revealed the highest non-progression rate for NFQ Level 7 new entrants (31%), followed by NFQ Level 6 (25%), and NFQ Level 8 (14%). By field of study, Services was found to have the highest non-progression rate at 28%, followed by Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction at 20%. An exploration of trends from 2016/17 to 2021/22 revealed that Services experienced the highest rate of non-progression each year and Education and Agriculture the lowest.

An exploration of the outcomes for new entrants who did not progress was undertaken by the CSO in collaboration with the HEA, for the first time in early 2024, providing a valuable insight into the outcomes for these students. The 2020/21 analysis revealed that more than 40% of new entrants who did not progress into year 2 were enrolled in another education course² after one year, with females more likely to be in education (46%) than males (36%). In terms of employment, a similar proportion of non-progressed male and female students were in employment³ after one year, with most non-progressed students working in the Wholesale, Retail, Accommodation and Food Service sectors. The Construction and Industry sectors were established as the third and fourth largest sectors of employment for non-progressed male students, employing two in five of the employed cohort of non-progressed male students from Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction courses. Of the students who did not progress from these courses, 85% were in employment after one year, with 27% of these in education and employment, suggesting a need for greater provision of flexible learn-as-you-earn opportunities. Approximately 7% of all non-progressed students were not in employment or education after one year, with an additional 5% not captured⁴.

In interpreting the data and trends presented above, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions requires consideration. March 2020 saw the introduction of Covid-19 restrictions, resulting in campus closures, the pivot to remote teaching and learning, assessment, and provision of student services, and a disruption to field and laboratory work (QQI, 2020). The 2019/20 new entrants were the first cohort affected by Covid-19 restrictions, however, while these students experienced remote assessment and examinations, their first-year experience was largely unaffected, which may explain the higher progression rate for this cohort. New entrants to higher education in 2020/21 and 2021/22, however, experienced calculated (2020/21) and accredited⁵ (2021/22) Leaving Certificate grades, resulting in grade inflation and a greater number of students meeting

² Information on the course enrolled in was not available at the time of analysis.

³ Information on employment conditions, i.e. part-time/full-time and nature of contract, was not available at the time of analysis.

⁴ Not captured means no activity exists in the administrative data sources for that year. Data drawn from statistical and administrative data sources across public service bodies using the National Data Infrastructure.

⁵ Leaving Certificate students could sit the examination, or get an accredited grade from the State Examinations Commission (SEC), or both sit the written exam and get an accredited grade from the SEC.

course entry requirements; a transition that was remote/hybrid in nature providing limited opportunities for interaction and engagement with peers and academic and teaching staff; and challenges relating to the access to, and engagement with teaching and learning and course content, with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those living in internet blackspots disproportionately affected⁶. Students reported challenges with motivation and engaging with their studies, quality of interactions and collaborative learning (Irish Survey of Student Engagement National Report 2021), and experiencing feelings of isolation, which affected their sense of belonging and wellbeing (USI, 2020). In addition, many students experienced financial hardship due to the loss of employment (QQI, 2020). The student experience, engagement with teaching and learning, and relationships with peers, and academic and teaching staff were reported by the National Forum as factors contributing to student success (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2019), hence the impact of the pandemic on 2020/21 and 2021/22 progression rates cannot be underestimated.

It is worth noting that the progression rates reported above are not unique to Ireland, with similar trends reported across OECD countries (OECD, 2023). In comparison to OECD countries, Ireland and the UK report higher completion rates for students who finished their studies by the end of the theoretical duration of the programme (OECD, 2022). However, when completion rates are examined for students completing their studies over a longer timeframe, completion rates increase for several OECD countries. The OECD highlights a relationship between open entry routes and flexible pathways and an increased likelihood of non-progression, and these factors should be taken into consideration when examining progression/continuation rates across OECD countries. A degree of caution is urged when interpreting the trends, due to differences in terminology and definitions employed across OECD countries and how data are captured and reported.

Themes arising from the Conference

Representatives attending the conference were invited to contribute and submit feedback during and following the conference. The themes identified below result from a review of the feedback provided following the conference (23 respondents from 145 attendees⁷) and are informed by themes raised at workshops and during panel discussions. It should be noted that the feedback provided may not reflect the views of all attendees or capture perspectives from across the sector, due to the low response rate and the characteristics of respondents i.e. attendees who responded to the anonymised survey may represent a specific area/interest within the sector. In addition, as the data and findings were presented at the conference, participants had limited opportunities to reflect on the findings, which may have influenced the themes raised and the feedback provided.

⁶ A fund for student devices was announced by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in August 2020 to assist with online and blended learning (DFHERIS, 2020).

⁷ Including attendees from the HEA.

Themes

1. Transitions
2. Student Engagement/Experience
3. Teaching, Learning, and Assessment
4. Institutions
5. Course Design
6. Data
7. Funding/Contracts
8. National Framework and Forum/Working Group

Many of the themes resonate with the findings of the HEA and CSO analyses and of research, such as the National Forum-funded research on student non-completion in Higher Education (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, 2015), StudentSurvey.ie (StudentSurvey.ie, 2022), and findings reported elsewhere such as by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) (Hillman, 2021), and the OECD. The findings of the National Forum supported research identified that course, personal, financial, medical/health, and family factors significantly contributed to non-completion, with course choice identified as the strongest factor in influencing student non-completion (National Forum, 2015, p. 36)⁸. Data reported by StudentSurvey.ie⁹ support these findings, with the 2022 Report (StudentSurvey.ie, 2022) also citing employment as a factor. The CSO data presented earlier on employment outcomes for non-progressed students (CSO, 2024) would seem to corroborate this finding.

As course and institution choice are important factors in influencing non-progression it is evident that the provision of timely and appropriate guidance to students to support decision-making and the transition from second level to tertiary education is required. The availability of clear, accessible, and readily understood information on educational opportunities to support students with their choices post-secondary education is essential, and a recommendation on this is included in the National Forum report (National Forum, 2015). The National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance and associated Strategic Action Plan 2024–2030 outlines objectives, outcomes, and strategic actions to develop and provide access to lifelong guidance, the establishment of a careers information portal, and provision of up-to-date accessible information on educational opportunities to support transitions and decision-making (Government of Ireland, 2023).

Each theme with key points raised by conference attendees is presented below. The themes highlighted are not mutually exclusive as the points raised apply across themes. Where existing national initiatives or supports are in place, these are indicated.

⁸ Note: the research explored non-completion rather than the non-progression of new entrants into year 2.

⁹ StudentSurvey.ie included a question on withdrawal for the first time in 2022, with students asked had they considered withdrawing, indicating reasons why (from a list of options).

1. Transitions

Transitions was a theme that emerged from the conference with attendees emphasising the important role of school guidance counselling and the provision of clear, accessible, and readily understood information on educational offerings in supporting students with their decision-making and transitions. The importance of early and targeted interventions in supporting the transition to first year and harnessing the potential afforded by social media in reaching out to and engaging students was also highlighted. Supports for students at greater risk of non-progression, in particular students from disadvantaged communities or first-generation students, was emphasised, along with the need to review, broaden, and expand entry routes and pathways to Higher Education to promote equity of access.

The challenges presented by the transition to tertiary education are well documented and are described in the National Forum supported research report (National Forum, 2015). The autonomy, large lecture numbers, and lack of compulsory attendance place greater ownership and responsibility on students for their learning, with some students finding this challenging. This, coupled with course-related factors such as workload and requirements, and incorrect course choice, account for higher non-progression rates for new entrants (National Forum, 2015). The pandemic and resulting pivot to remote teaching and learning added to the transition challenges experienced by students in 2020/21 and 2021/22. This is evidenced in the findings of the 2021 StudentSurvey.ie report, with statistically significant differences reported for 'collaborative learning', 'student–faculty interaction', and 'quality of interactions' by first-year 2020/21 undergraduate respondents compared to previous years (2018–2020) (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021).

The 2022 StudentSurvey.ie report states that 11% of respondents (undergraduate first-year students) considered transferring to another institution (StudentSurvey.ie, 2022) suggesting that their choice of institution may not have suited them. The CSO finding presented earlier re the enrolment of non-progressed students in another course in another institution after one year may lend further support for this proposition. However, more research is required to establish the motivation behind this outcome i.e. if it is course and/or institution related.

Due to the recognition of the importance of the transition to higher education and the challenges faced by students, *Transition* is on the policy agenda and this is reflected in the Statements of Strategy (2023–2025) of DFHERIS and the Department of Education (see Strategic Actions, Goal 1 (5)), and the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance and associated Action Plan (2024–2030) (DFHERIS, 2023; Department of Education, 2023; Government of Ireland, 2023). System transitions were the focus of the 2023 DFHERIS Sectoral Research and Evaluation Group policy paper, 'Evidence Base for the Tertiary Sector: System Transitions' (DFHERIS, 2023), and this paper references work undertaken previously at national level on supporting a better transition to higher education in 2011 (see www.transition.ie) and by the Transitions Reform Steering Group (see [Transitions Group](#)).

There are several national policy initiatives and programmes in place led and managed by the HEA, such as the National Access Plan 2022–2028 (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022) and the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), which target students at greater risk of

non-progression; the National Tertiary Office (NTO) and National Apprenticeship Office (NAO) and the development and expansion of tertiary education pathways; and the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (Healthy Ireland and HEA, 2020–2025)¹⁰ and the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (HEA, 2020) to address student mental health and wellbeing. In addition, all HEIs have initiatives, programmes, and supports in place to facilitate the transition to higher education, though these vary across institutions, and it would be useful to establish practices that are in place to inform good practice and national policy development.

2. Student Engagement/Experience

The influence of external factors such as the cost of living, sourcing accommodation, and long commute times on the student experience and on student engagement were highlighted during the conference. These factors were identified by the National Forum (National Forum, 2015) as leading to an increased likelihood of non-completion due to students having less time to engage academically and socially. The important role of clubs, societies, and associations in fostering a sense of belonging amongst students was recognised at the conference, and it was emphasised that more needs to be done to provide students with access to flexible course structures and pathways, and for social and extra-curricular activities to better align with the needs of a diverse student population.

UNESCO reports that students experiencing financial hardship and from lower socio-economic backgrounds may have less time available to them to participate in higher education than their peers due to having to work, and that these students may benefit from flexible pathways/part-time provision (UNESCO, 2022). The HEA findings presented earlier highlighted that new entrants from areas of higher deprivation are at a greater risk of non-progression (HEA, 2024), with CSO findings indicating that 33% of non-progressed students enrolled in education after one year are in education and employment (CSO, 2024), lending support for part-time and flexible provision.

Providing students with a forum to raise and discuss mental health and wellbeing concerns was emphasised by conference attendees. The importance of student mental health and wellbeing to student success was highlighted in the National Forum report on student success (National Forum, 2019). The pandemic presented significant challenges to student mental health and wellbeing, resulting in a greater number of students reporting difficulties during and post pandemic (USI, 2020). In recognition of the challenges presented by the pandemic, the government provided additional funding to institutions for student services in 2020, and the provision of such funding to institutions has continued since.

National policy initiatives and guidelines to address these external challenges include the National Access Plan 2022–2028 (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022), the National Forum Student Success Framework (National Forum, 2021), the National Student Engagement Programme

¹⁰ The HEA Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework was cocreated, through a consultative process, by Higher Education Institutions, the Department of Health, and the HSE. In 2022 the Framework was officially transferred to the HEA, supported by Healthy Ireland.

(NStEP) (<https://studentengagement.ie/>), Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making (Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education, 2016), the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (Healthy Ireland and HEA, 2020–2025), and the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (HEA, 2020). Services, initiatives, and programmes available within institutions include extracurricular activities, student support services (student health services, pastoral care supports), and student societies.

3. Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

The importance of inclusive teaching and learning, and assessment design and practices, accessible remote teaching and learning, and building on the learning arising from the flexible learning methodologies employed during the Covid-19 pandemic (National Forum, 2020; QQI, 2020) was raised by attendees. Student involvement in the co-creation of courses and in teaching and assessment was highlighted as best practice, and it was acknowledged that greater student involvement in course design and development is required (ref. also in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Strategy Group, Department of Education and Skills, 2011)). It is worth noting that all HEIs involve students to some extent in the development and/or approval process of new courses, and regularly capture course/module feedback from students (see [QQI CINNTE review reports](#)).

Inclusive curriculum design and teaching and learning practices that are responsive to students' needs can promote student engagement and contribute to student success (National Forum, 2019). The pandemic and subsequent pivot to remote teaching and learning presented significant challenges for inclusive teaching and accessible digital content, due to the limited availability of appropriate infrastructure and digital content to facilitate inclusive teaching and assessment practices¹¹. Experience of online teaching and learning was also limited, with many academic and teaching staff involved in online teaching for the first time, thus having limited skills in this regard.

The Tirana Communiqué (EHEA, 2024) identifies the key role of teaching staff in the provision of 'high-quality, learner-centred and innovative learning and teaching', however, demands faced by academic staff in balancing their teaching and research commitments can present barriers in this regard, due to the lack of recognition of teaching in academic promotions criteria (European Commission, 2024). The Tirana Communiqué (EHEA, 2024) stresses the need for parity of teaching with research and other professional work, highlighting the role of institutions in providing appropriate working conditions, staff development, and career progression to achieve this.

Much has been done nationally in the teaching, learning, and assessment domain over the past two decades, with the establishment of the National Forum in 2005; the development of resources and open courses to develop best practice; the provision of funding to HEIs for teaching, learning, and assessment initiatives through the Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement in Higher Education (SATLE) fund and [N-TUTORR](#); the

¹¹ Institutions implemented alternative assessment methodologies to examinations and introduced measures to ensure students were not disadvantaged by the new methodologies (see QQI, 2020).

establishment of the National Forum Associates to inform, develop, and share best practices in teaching, learning, and assessment across the sector; and the development of the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education (ALTITUDE Project) funded by the [Programme for Access to Higher Education](#) (PATH) 4 Phase I.

4. Institutions

Institutions have a key role to play in increasing student progression and retention rates through the development and implementation of student success policies and initiatives, and inclusive structures, policies, and administration. Feedback from the conference highlighted the need for institutions to incentivise good teaching practices through the recognition of teaching in academic promotions criteria¹²; to recognise the demands that the dual role of teacher–researcher can place on academic staff; and to ensure sufficient resourcing for the development of inclusive teaching practices to foster student engagement and belonging (highlighted under ‘3. Teaching, Learning, and Assessment’ also). Employing a whole-of-institution approach to student progression that involves teaching, research, and professional staff, and students was emphasised, along with greater collaboration and engagement across the sector to facilitate the sharing and exchange of best practices. A more integrated approach was also highlighted in the research report supported by the National Forum (National Forum, 2015), which noted the importance of the quality and extent of students’ interactions with the institution in the broader sense rather than through specific interventions and services. The UNESCO conceptual paper ‘The right to higher education: A social justice perspective’ (UNESCO, 2022), also emphasises students’ interactions with the institution, highlighting the important role of inclusive institutional policies, administration, and structures in addressing barriers to student success and ultimately in promoting the participation and engagement, and progression and retention of students. ‘Equity deserving groups’¹³, may, in particular, lack the social capital to effectively engage with institutions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, student interaction with institutions and the delivery of inclusive services by institutions were impacted due to the pivot to remote provision.

There are several national guidelines and initiatives in place that address a whole-of-institutional approach to student success. Such guidelines and initiatives include the National Forum [Student Success Toolkit](#), the Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (Healthy Ireland and HEA, 2020–2025), the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework (HEA, 2020), Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision Making (Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education, 2016), the SATLE fund, and the National Associates network. Academic and teaching staff focused initiatives and activities are ongoing through the work of the National Forum and are being advanced through the development of the [Professional Development Recognition Framework](#). It is expected that the Framework will inform the recognition of teaching and learning by institutions through a review of academic promotions criteria.

¹² Also highlighted by the European Commission (2024) and the Tirana Communiqué (2024).

¹³ See UNESCO 2022.

5. Course Design

Conference attendees highlighted the importance of inclusive and flexible course structures and the recognition of teaching and learning practice by academic promotions criteria. Much can be done to develop inclusive teaching, learning, and assessment practices and to diversify and decolonize the curriculum, making it more inclusive and accessible to a diverse student population (UNESCO, 2022).

Flexible course structures (e.g. part-time and modular options) and pathways that provide opportunities for students to avail of modules and subjects from different disciplines and promote the development of a wider set of competencies may increase progression rates, as students who find that their course does not suit them can take a different pathway. Part-time/modular provision and flexible timetabling policies may also support the progression of students who commute long distances or who are in employment (National Forum, 2015).

Staging qualifications to provide opportunities for students to achieve incremental awards or exit awards (e.g. minor award), with a facility to return later to complete a degree, is an option in some OECD countries. In Sweden, for instance, students may take freestanding courses, combining courses to achieve a degree, and pause studies and re-enter at a later date (OECD, 2022). In some OECD countries such as Slovenia, students can avail of a 'stop-out' and subsequently return to resume their studies (OECD, 2022).

The National Access Plan 2022–2028 (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022) outlines measures for the provision of more flexible forms of learning to support progression, including blended/online and part-time, in particular for students from lower-income families or disadvantaged groups who may not be in a position to engage full-time in education (Goal 2 Flexibility). As a measure to provide support for more flexible forms of learning to students considered underrepresented in higher education, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science recently announced a [part-time fee scheme](#) for specified undergraduate courses. As the Indecon Review of the Student Grant Scheme identified an unmet demand for part-time learning provision (Indecon, 2022) the participation and progression of students enrolled on courses supported by the scheme can be monitored over time to establish the likely appetite for part-time provision. The CSO finding reported earlier re non-progressed students in education and employment (CSO, 2024) would seem to also lend support for an 'earn while you learn' approach. The socio-economic status of the students, however, was not indicated in the CSO analysis.

Nationally, HEA-funded initiatives such as the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) are incentivising the development of innovative, flexible, and industry-focused courses and modules, and the development of flexible learning pathways through stackable micro-credentials. Some institutions, such as DCU, are utilising HCI funding to reconfigure and transform their undergraduate programme offerings ([DCU Futures](#)) to align with industry needs, and the seven universities are participating in the IUA MicroCreds project funded through HCI. In addition, the National Forum and the [N-TUTORR national project](#) provide funding and resources to institutions to encourage best practice in teaching, learning, and assessment (including digital transformation), to support student engagement and belonging.

6. Data

Data featured strongly in feedback from conference attendees, with calls for more data on student non-progression (including reporting data for the first few months of year 1) and retention (reasons for withdrawal) and at-risk groups; progression within and across institutions; and on students who take a year out. Benchmarking data and reporting mechanisms across OECD countries, the need for more data-sharing agreements between State Agencies, and clearer definitions on progression and retention were identified by attendees as areas requiring attention. As definitions of progression vary nationally, such as the [SUSI](#) definition¹⁴ and the [HEA](#) definition¹⁵ (for capturing data on progression), the development of an agreed national definition may warrant consideration.

While recent years have seen an expansion in the data available to the HEA through improved Eircode and PPSN coverage, resulting in a greater interrogation of progression data, it is evident that more data are required, such as the inclusion of students off books, the characteristics of students (ethnicity, country of domicile) who withdraw and reasons for their withdrawal (employment status, length of commute etc), and additional analyses by the CSO may be useful to establish the student characteristics associated with employment and education outcomes after one year. A gap in national reporting is the collation of data on student progression across the student lifecycle and on completion rates, which are available for several OECD countries (see Education at a Glance (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2022)).

The [Bologna Follow-up Group](#) notes the importance of capturing reliable data to promote the social dimension of higher education, to inform policy development, and to facilitate the identification of students who require additional supports (Bologna Follow-Up Group, 2024). This includes data on the composition of the student body, access and participation, non-progression, and completion. The UNESCO (2022) conceptual paper highlights the role of data in 'generating early warning systems' for support services to target students, and the provision of interconnected student-centric services, as contributing to improved completion rates (UNESCO, 2022). The role of institutions in capturing accurate and up-to-date data on progression throughout the student lifecycle is an important one, as such data can inform measures to identify students at greater risk of non-progression and support early intervention approaches.

Nationally, HEIs return a wealth of data to the HEA via the Student Records System (SRS) returns each year. The [HEA](#) conducts audits on the returns, and subsequently collates and reports on the [data](#) annually. The SRS 2.0 project, which is underway, may result in further analyses of progression and retention, such as examining progression rates throughout the student lifecycle. The 2022/23 HEA analysis will, for the first time, define 'transfer to another course in another institution' as progressed. In addition, several HEA agreements are in

¹⁴ 'Progression means successfully moving from one year of an approved course to the next year or attending a course that leads to a higher level of qualification than any you may already hold', SUSI Glossary.

¹⁵ 'A student is classified as having progressed if they are present in the following academic year in the same institute', HEA, student progression.

place with other State bodies, such as the CSO, which allow for additional analyses to be undertaken.

7. Funding/Contracts

Funding and short-term contracts were highlighted by attendees during the conference and in the feedback received, as reported earlier. Funding concerns were two-fold: they related to student funding and grants that are in line with inflation and the cost of living, and the funding of institutional posts and initiatives to support student engagement and belonging, and peer-led supports. On the former, attendees highlighted the need for student funding and grants to address part-time and modular learning provision (see above under 5. Course Design also) to ensure greater access to education. The Indecon Report (Indecon, 2022) recommended the extension of supports to include more flexible forms of learning to facilitate greater access to, and participation in, higher education. This is also highlighted in the National Access Plan 2022–2028 (HEA and DFHERIS, 2022).

Conference attendees called for a shift away from annual funding models to more sustainable (longer-term) funding for student services. The need to examine and address the ubiquity of short-term contracts in student services was also emphasised. Since 2020, additional funding to support student services has been made available to institutions by the government in response to the increase in student numbers seeking counselling and mental health services following the Covid-19 pandemic.

In recent years, the HEA has provided multi-annual funding for initiatives such as the SATLE fund. In addition, a micro-credentials learner fee subsidy under HCI Pillar 3 was announced in March 2024 to incentivise lifelong learning opportunities and to support the upskilling of staff.

8. National Framework and Forum/Working Group

The need for a ‘national framework/guidance policy as guiding principles’ was identified as an area requiring attention, with attendees also expressing a desire for an opportunity to engage further through a national forum/working group or annual conference to share knowledge and practices.

Greater clarity on what is meant by a national framework is required, due to insufficient information provided in the feedback. This could be interpreted as developing a national good practice framework or policy guidelines similar to the [AdvanceHE](#) ‘Frameworks for Enhancing Student Success — Student Access, Retention, Attainment and Progression in Higher Education’ (AdvanceHE). The National Forum published ‘Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education’ (National Forum, 2019) and the [Student Success Toolkit](#) in 2019, and a review of the resources is underway.

In terms of a national forum/working group, there are existing fora nationally, such as the [National Forum Associates](#) and HEA Board Student Engagement and Teaching & Learning standing committee (SETLC) that could include student progression and retention on their

respective agendas. The Department of Education has also convened a Lifelong Guidance Forum comprising stakeholders from second-level, tertiary education, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), government departments, and industry that could explore the role of guidance in supporting student progression. The importance of guidance and counselling services in supporting 'access to, participation in, and completion of higher education' is highlighted by the Bologna Follow-Up Group (2024).

Discussion

The themes presented above highlight the complexity and multiplicity of factors underlying student progression and retention, and the need for more data and research in this area to inform policy development and future work. Course and institution choice, academic preparedness, financial insecurity and availability of accommodation, and mental health and well-being are factors that influence non-progression (National Forum, 2015), along with student characteristics including socio-economic background and gender. However, it is important to recognise that progression does not necessarily reflect student success, as students may withdraw for many reasons and return to higher education at a later stage. The CSO analysis of outcomes for 2020/21 non-progressed students revealed that 88% were either in employment or education after one year (CSO, 2024).

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on progression rates in 2020/21 and 2021/22 cannot be underestimated, with new entrants experiencing greater challenges associated with the transition to higher education than their predecessors, namely a remote/hybrid experience of higher education resulting in challenges to personal and social wellbeing; access to, and engagement with teaching and learning and course content; and personal finances. In addition, grade inflation resulting from Leaving Certificate calculated/accredited grades, a remote/hybrid experience of senior cycle, and limited access to second-level guidance counselling and school supports were factors that influenced progression outcomes for these students. Progression data for 2022/23 and 2023/24 new entrants will reveal if recent trends continue or return to pre-pandemic levels.

Given the range of themes that emerged from the HEA conference on student progression, it is evident that a cross-sectoral response involving government departments, educational institutions (second-level and tertiary education), state agencies, students, and employers is required, as several points raised are beyond the scope of the HEA to address e.g. the provision of appropriate guidance at second level to support effective decision-making on educational choices, and the design and delivery of flexible course structures by HEIs. The HEA has a role to inform and lead policy development and to fund specific initiatives and measures implemented by HEIs to address non-progression and retention. It is evident, however, from the data, research findings, and the conference themes, that more data and research are required to inform next steps.

In recent years, new data-sharing arrangements between the HEA and the CSO, SUSI, SOLAS, and the Department of Education have provided greater insights into the factors influencing the non-progression of new entrants. The assignment of a Deprivation Index Score (DIS) to

each student, facilitated by improved Eircode coverage, now provides information on the socio-economic profile of students; and improved PPSN coverage amongst the student population has enabled tracking of students across HEIs for the first time. The 2022/23 new entrant progression report will capitalise on this, as a student who has transferred to another HEI will be reported as progressed. Work on examining course transfer data to establish if students transferred to the same course in a different institution is also planned. The 2024 HEA–CSO collaboration, highlighted above, represented a significant step forward in understanding the outcomes for non-progressed students. There is an opportunity to build on this work through further analyses, such as the identification of outcomes for non-progressed students whose outcomes are unknown; the interrogation of employment sector data to establish the employment conditions of non-progressed students, i.e. full-time or part-time employment and salary; and the characteristics of non-progressed students in employment and/or education.

An exploration of how progression data captured by HEIs inform evidence-informed interventions and the development of progression plans would be of benefit. In addition, a scoping of practices by HEIs that specifically target non-progressed students to establish their characteristics (e.g. first-generation students, ethnicity, country of domicile, reasons for non-progression, their destinations) and to facilitate their onward transitions would be useful. This would build on the research supported by the National Forum in 2015. The collation of such practices nationally will facilitate the identification and sharing of good practice, inform policy development and future initiatives, and enable a more proactive approach to progression and result in improved outcomes for non-progressed students.

The potential of the Systems Development and Performance Dialogue process could be harnessed in the first instance to enable a system-level understanding of opportunities and challenges; establish the monitoring, effectiveness, and impact of existing policies and initiatives/interventions; inform the development of student-centred policies and practices; and to promote cross-institutional collaboration. It is worth noting that a significant number of HEIs identify a metric in the teaching and learning pillar of their Performance Agreements, indicating that progression is a priority area for institutions.

It is clear from the points highlighted in the discussion above that more data and evidence are required to inform next steps. The inclusion of all student cohorts in future national analyses is worth consideration, namely, an examination of progression and completion rates across the undergraduate student lifecycle and for postgraduate (taught and research) courses.

Glossary

ALTITUDE	All Learners are Transformatively Included Through Universal Design in Education. The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education.
CINNTE	QQI's review cycle for higher education institutions
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCU	Dublin City University
DEIS	Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools
DFHERIS	The Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DIS	Deprivation Index Score
EHEA	The European Higher Education Area
HCI	Human Capital Initiative
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
IUA	Irish Universities Association
NAO	National Apprenticeship Office
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NStEP	National Student Engagement Programme
NTO	National Tertiary Office
N-TUTORR	National Technological University Transformation for Recovery and Resilience
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PATH	Programme for Access to Higher Education
PPSN	Personal Public Service Number
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SATLE	Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement in Higher Education Fund
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SETLC	Student Engagement and Teaching & Learning HEA Board Standing Committee
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna
SRS	Student Records System

SUSI Student Universal Support Ireland
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USI Union of Students in Ireland

References

- AdvanceHE. (n.d.). *Student Access, Retention, Attainment and Progression in Higher Education Framework*. Retrieved from <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/Student%20Access%2C%20Retention%2C%20Attainment%20and%20Progression%20in%20Higher%20Education%20Framework.pdf>
- ALTITUDE Project. (n.d.). *ALTITUDE - The National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education*. AHEAD Educational Press. Retrieved from <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ALTITUDE-Charter-supplied-digital-2.pdf>
- Bologna Follow-Up Group. (2024). *Indicators and Descriptors for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area*. Retrieved from https://ehea.info/Immagini/BFUG_BE_VA_88_9_5_2_WG_SD_Indicators_and_Descriptors1.pdf
- CSO. (2024). Higher Education Outcomes — Non Progression 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-heo/highereducationoutcomes-nonprogression2021/>
- Department of Education. (2023). *Statement of Strategy 2023-2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/269809/4632479a-353e-4e38-b8ee-ad46feaed2b1.pdf#page=null>
- DFHERIS. (2020). Minister Harris announces 17,000 laptops ordered to assist students with online and blended learning. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/7143d-minister-harris-announces-17000-laptops-ordered-to-assist-students-with-online-and-blended-learning/>
- DFHERIS. (2023). *Evidence Base for the Tertiary Sector: System Transitions*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/264716/c4cc35b8-b2aa-43ac-8108-9417ea5e6717.pdf#page=null>
- DFHERIS. (2023). *Statement of Strategy 2023-2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/b1aad-statement-of-strategy-2023-2025/>
- EHEA. (2024). Tirana EHEA Ministerial Conference, 29–30 May 2024. Retrieved from <https://ehea.info/Immagini/Tirana-Communique.pdf>
- European Commission. (2024). *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on attractive and sustainable careers in higher education*. Retrieved from <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/161c2e3e-ec48-11ee-8e14-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/>
- Government of Ireland. (2023). *National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance: Strategic Action Plan 2024–2030*. Retrieved from <https://assets.gov.ie/279196/ac7dfa38-00fb-4dcf-8285-0f187b76469c.pdf>
- HEA. (2020). *National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework*. Retrieved from <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2020/10/HEA-NSMHS-Framework.pdf>

- HEA. (2024). *Analysis of Non-Progression among Higher Education New Entrants in Ireland, 2016/17 to 2021/22*. Retrieved from <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2024/02/Analysis-of-Non-Progression-2016-17-to-2021-22-Detailed-Report-1.pdf>
- HEA and DFHERIS. (2022). *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028*. Retrieved from <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2024/07/National-Access-Plan-2022-2028-FINAL.pdf>
- Healthy Ireland and HEA. (2020–2025). *Higher Education Healthy Campus Charter and Framework*. Retrieved from <https://hea.ie/policy/health-and-wellbeing-landing-page/healthy-campus-landing-page/healthy-campus-charter-and-framework/>
- Hillman, N. (2021). *A short guide to non-continuation in UK universities (HEPI Policy Note 28)*. Retrieved from <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/01/07/a-short-guide-to-non-continuation-in-uk-universities/>
- Indecon. (2022). *Review of the Student Grant Scheme*. Retrieved from https://www.indecon.ie/assets/files/pdf/report_on_indecon_review_of_the_student_grant_scheme.pdf
- National Forum. (2020). *Reflecting and Learning: The Move to Remote/Online Teaching and Learning in Irish Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2020-Reflecting-and-Learning-web-ready.pdf>
- National Forum. (2021). *Guiding Framework for Embedding Student Success*. Retrieved from <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2021-Student-Success-Guiding-Framework.pdf>
- National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education. (2015). *Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research into Student Non-Completion in Higher Education in Ireland*. Retrieved from <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2015-Why-Students-Leave-Findings-from-Qualitative-Research-into-Student-Non-Completion-in-Higher-Education-in-Ireland.pdf>
- National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. (2019). *Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2019-Student-Success-report-web-ready.pdf>
- OECD. (2022). *Education at a Glance 2022*. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2022_3197152b-en.html
- OECD. (2023). *Education at a Glance 2023*. Retrieved from https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en.html
- QQI. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2022-04/the-impact-of-covid-19-modifications-to-teaching-learning-and-assessment-in-irish-further-education-and-training-and-higher-education.pdf>

- Strategy Group, Department of Education and Skills. (2011). *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Retrieved from <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Strategy-for-Higher-Education-2030.pdf>
- StudentSurvey.ie. (2021). *Irish Survey of Student Engagement National Report 2021*. Retrieved from <https://studentsurvey.ie/reports/studentsurveyie-national-report-2021>
- StudentSurvey.ie. (2022). *Irish Survey of Student Engagement National Report 2022*. Retrieved from <https://report.studentsurvey.ie/2022/home>
- UNESCO. (2022). *The right to higher education: a social justice perspective*. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381750>
- USI. (2020). *National Report on Students and COVID-19*. Retrieved from https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/COVID_RESEARCH_FINAL.pdf
- Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education. (2016). *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making*. Retrieved from <https://www.thea.ie/contentfiles/HEA-IRC-Student-Engagement-Report-Apr2016-min.pdf>