HEA | An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority

Analysis of Student Progression in Higher Education Case Studies

Report on Key Trends and Themes for the Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education

Analysis and Report prepared by

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on behalf of the Higher Education Authority, 2025

Foreword

I am pleased to present 'Analysis of Student Progression in Higher Education Case Studies: Report on key trends and themes' prepared for the HEA Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education.
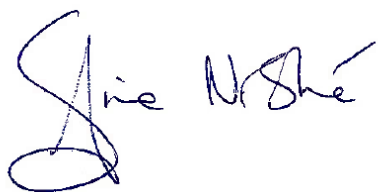
The Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education was established by the HEA in January 2025. Its establishment followed from the 2024 HEA conference, Exploring Student Progression in Higher Education, which called for evidence-based, collaborative sectoral strategies. The Forum comprises representatives (Associates) from seventeen Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and representatives from the HEA. Its purpose is to establish an evidence base on student progression in higher education to inform policy and practice development, and next steps.

To inform the early work of the Forum, the HEA invited institutions represented on the Policy Forum to prepare and submit case studies of evidence-informed practice on student progression. This exercise was undertaken in February–March 2025, working to a template developed by the HEA in consultation with and as agreed by the Forum.

I would like to extend my thanks to the sixteen Higher Education Institutions that submitted a total of 42 student progression case studies. This report presents the key themes and trends arising from the analysis of the case studies submitted by institutions. It explores the breadth of practices that exist across institutions to support student progression throughout the undergraduate student lifecycle.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the members of the Policy Forum for their guidance and advice on the template and for their engagement and commitment to this research. Lastly, I would like to thank Ceartas Consulting for its work in analysing the case studies, collating findings, and preparing this report, and to the HEA, in particular Linda Darbey, for overseeing and managing the process.

This report represents an important first step taken by the Policy Forum to develop an evidence base on student progression in higher education and its findings will thus be of interest to the sector. I encourage higher education institutions and the HEA to draw on the findings of this report, to further inform the activities of the Policy Forum and to develop and strengthen existing institutional practices.

Dr. Áine Ní Shé, Chair of the Policy Forum

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms[1]

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALC	Academic Learning Centre
ATU	Atlantic Technological University
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DCU	Dublin City University
FE	Further Education
HCI	Human Capital Initiative
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route
HEI	Higher Education Institution
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
Policy Forum	HEA Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RCSI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAF	Student Assistance Fund
SATLE	Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning
SETU	South East Technological University
SRS	Student Record System
SUSI	Student Universal Support Ireland
TU Dublin	Technological University of Dublin
TUS	Technological University of the Shannon

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[1] Some HEI names were not abbreviated in the report. The full list of invited HEIs is provided at Appendix 2.

UCC	University College Cork
UCD	University College Dublin
UL	University of Limerick
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment

Executive Summary

In early 2025, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) invited Irish Higher Education Institutions represented on the Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education to prepare and submit case studies of evidence-informed practice on student progression.[2] The case studies would inform the development of an evidence base on student progression.

In particular, participants at a HEA policy conference on student progression in higher education in 2024 highlighted a growing body of practice for student retention and progression among Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The conference report, and the membership of the Policy Forum established on foot of the conference, recognised the potential value of making these practices available to the higher education sector as a whole.[3]

On this basis, gathering and analysing the practices in a series of case studies aims to direct national attention to useable innovations in specific higher education settings and to apply learnings across the sector. In this way, the case studies would contribute to achieving and sustaining outcomes for student progression in Irish HEIs.

A HEA template was circulated in March 2025, which invited 17 HEIs to detail the reasons for the development of interventions on student progression, to describe their aims and the ways in which the interventions are being implemented, the outcomes being achieved, the resources needed, and the systems in place to monitor their effectiveness.

In total, 16 HEIs presented 42 case studies in their responses, amounting to 1–5 intervention case studies per institution. The comprehensive nature of the responses, together with a breadth of intervention type and the novelty of many of the case studies presented, signals the high priority accorded to interventions for student retention and progression in the higher education sector in Ireland.

The analysis of the case studies identifies commonalities and differences between the case studies and explores the key trends and emergent themes through a cross-case comparison. The questionnaire invited the HEIs to state whether the intervention aimed to support student retention and progression, or to reduce non-progression. Overall, interventions supporting retention and progression predominated.

One-third of the case studies are dedicated to this category of intervention, while 62% of the case studies are intended to both support retention and progression and to reduce non-progression. Just two of the case studies aim to reduce non-progression specifically.

The evidence suggests that a range of personal, social, and economic factors impact on the likelihood of withdrawal. There may be a need, therefore, to gather further information on effective practices targeted at students at risk of non-progression so as to better tailor supports for particular groups.

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[2] These institutions are designated institutions of higher education under the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 (section 53) and include an institution that the HEA works with under Statute, and which is in receipt of core public funding.

[3] HEA Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education | Policy | Higher Education Authority

The case studies also demonstrate that in HEIs with progression rates that are close to the national average, the institution is more likely to distinguish the purpose of the intervention as being either for retention and progression or to reduce non-progression. By contrast, HEIs with higher rates of non-progression students are more likely to be implementing interventions that aim to both support retention and progression and to reduce rates of non-progression, simultaneously.

In addition, some key trends are in evidence. As one example, the case studies include a significant number of IT developments as a major trend. Such projects often serve to facilitate early intervention approaches by helping to identify and to engage students as early as possible in the student lifecycle. In general, early intervention and a whole-of-institution focus on acculturation of new entrants figured prominently in the case studies presented. These strategic approaches at a leadership level highlight a recognition among HEIs of the importance of considering both the risks and the protective factors that are relevant to student retention and progression.

Further to a cross-case study analysis, analytic themes emerged that are relevant to Irish HEI interventions for student progression. These include early intervention and whole-of institution approaches, piloting initiatives intended for upscaling, reducing barriers to progression, targeting of students at risk of non-progression, data-led monitoring, enrolment type, funding source, and monitoring and evaluation.

These analytic themes are characteristic of the practices presented across the case studies as a whole. In addition, and reflecting one of the main aims for the collation and analysis of Irish HEI case studies on student progression, the themes contribute to the development of a conceptual map of Irish HEI practices. The map may be applied as a process model by any HEI wishing to design and specify an intervention for student progression, with its key components specified through the discussion.

In concluding with insights for future practice, the report identifies some gaps in the information gathered that may form the basis for future qualitative research or may be available through further discussion with HEIs. It would be useful, for example, to gather more information on the case studies through an implementation lens, including the barriers and enablers encountered. Generally, it would also be useful to explore monitoring and evaluation frameworks in more detail.

Finally, the authors present seven example case studies graphically, to illustrate a possible approach to demonstrating the full set of case studies presented. The report authors consider that presenting all 42 case studies in a similar fashion would address a significant gap, by demonstrating the range of innovative Irish HEI practices on student progression.

1. Introduction

Through the HEA Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education (Policy Forum), in early 2025, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) invited Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to detail good practice interventions they had designed and implemented with the aim of supporting student retention and progression and reducing non-progression rates.[4] Each intervention contributed by a HEI would represent a distinct good practice case study and the HEI could present up to five such case studies.

In April 2025, the HEA commissioned external support to analyse the practices presented in the case studies and to produce a report for the Policy Forum, which would be discussed at an in-person Policy Forum event on student progression scheduled for late May. This meeting would facilitate in-depth discussion on a range of information and data prepared or commissioned by the HEA for the purposes of guiding national policy and future practice.

Qualitative research on student progression interventions is sparse in Ireland (Burroughs et al., 2015). While this finding is a decade old, a quick review of the literature suggests that it remains largely the case at national level. The report aims to fill a key gap in data and evidence, by analysing and modelling good practice interventions in student progression in Ireland and by highlighting areas requiring further development. Further to the analysis of the 42 HEI case studies, the authors define key features of value to Irish HEIs interested in designing, implementing, and evaluating effective interventions to support student progression and reduce non-progression. To promote its use, the report has been produced as an accessible, practice-centred resource for both the HEA Policy Forum membership and Irish HEIs.

In the remaining sections of this report, the authors consider the context for intervention design and specification in HEIs and describe the background to the Irish HEI case studies. Next, the report details the methodology applied to the qualitative case studies. The analysis follows, organised in line with the template issued to HEIs, and includes the following sections: overview (development context and implementation); aims, objectives and actions; resourcing; and oversight, including monitoring and evaluation.

A summary of the key themes emerging from the case studies concludes the analysis. A discussion follows, which models the HEI case studies for the purposes of drawing out lessons and considerations for future practice. The report authors summarise the main insights gained through the analysis and discussion and suggest there is more to learn with respect to some aspects of HEI interventions on student progression. In addition, seven example HEI interventions illustrate a possible approach to demonstrating and transferring the practices described in the case studies. The final section concludes the report and is followed by three appendices: detailing the analytic themes, listing the HEI participants, and providing the original HEA questionnaire template.

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[4]   The term 'student progression', as used in this report, is a de facto synonym of the phrase 'student retention and progression'.

2. Context and Background

This section provides a brief discussion of the main concepts that influence the design and specification of Irish HEI interventions on student progression, including transitions and the changing landscape of the student lifecycle. It then situates the development of the HEI case studies that form the basis for this report, by describing the background to the HEA's invitation to Irish HEIs to submit case studies of student progression interventions.

2.1 Transition as a focus for HEI interventions

The transition to higher education is an exciting time for new entrants and is, typically, accompanied by personal, social, and academic growth. Irish HEIs recognise a need to support new entrants in their transition from the more structured delivery of the second level education curriculum to academic learning at third level. Moreover, transition occurs routinely for students through the academic experience, and there is greater variation in transition type as academic pathways have become more diverse and complex.

The student cohort is also more diverse, as access to education and the HE ecosystem has evolved, and participation has increased. Examples include, more mature students, working students, as well as students from more diverse communities. The National Access Plan (2022–2028) frames these changes and indicates the fact that while progress has been made, significant challenges remain for some under-represented groups, including students from the Irish Traveller community, students from disadvantaged areas, and first-time mature students.[5]

For many students at risk of non-progression, the barriers to completing their programme may be out of their immediate control, including factors such as health, emotional, family, accommodation, or funding. In addition, course choice is consistently the strongest predictor of non-completion, with students frequently citing mismatched expectations, difficulty with course content, or a desire to transfer to a different discipline (HEA, 2024b; Burroughs et al., 2015). External challenges, such as financial constraints, a lack of social integration, and the effectiveness of institutional monitoring mechanisms, also significantly shape student retention outcomes.[6] The most recent HEA analysis of student retention and progression data further underscores the role played by socio-economic background, Leaving Certificate points, and institutional type as factors influencing the likelihood of non-progression.[7]

Irish HEIs vary widely in their history, their culture, their geographic catchment, in their scale and resources — all of which impact on the HEI progression rate, and the evidence indicates that progression and non-progression rates differ across institutions, by discipline as well as by cohort (HEA, 2024a).

There is a need, therefore, for each HEI to consider the particular institutional and systemic barriers that interact with students' personal, socio-economic, and family circumstances, and may hinder or support student success in terms of retention and progression. In addition, a successful transition into higher

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[5]   See https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2024/07/National-Access-Plan-2022-2028-FINAL.pdf
[6]   See https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2024/10/HEA_Student_Prog_Conf_Report_Sept24.pdf
[7]   See https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/progression/report/

education has an outsized, positive effect on student success so that HEIs are strongly motivated to intervene in the first year to support student progression throughout the academic lifecycle (Yorke and Longdon, 2008).

However, since both the *duration* and the *impact* of transitions to and through higher education emerge from a complex interplay of personal, socio-economic, and contextual or situational factors over time, HEIs may find it difficult to design and implement effective evidence-based interventions to support student progression, including for new entrants.[8]

2.2 Student progression interventions in perspective

HEIs have an interest in ensuring that students who enter the HEI on an academic programme successfully complete that programme on time. This model aligns with public funding for individual higher education students and with the institutional planning required to deliver portfolios of academic programmes to large numbers of students annually. At the level of the institution, policies and pathways facilitate the reality of the student experience in practice. As just one example among many, traditionally, provision has overwhelmingly involved full-time and in-person programmes. However, in recent years there has been an increase in part-time and online provision.[9]

Shifting concepts/terminology in the literature on student progression may be associated with such changes and are also reflected in the case studies.[10] For example, the authors note that the term 'student success' has gained currency in recent times and coheres, in practice, as a portfolio of strategic or wrap-around supports for students. In addition, new models aim to link and order the relevant concepts.[11] The term 'student progression', applied by the HEA and in this report, encapsulates the HEIs' aim to support student persistence in their higher education goals and to foster progression, including by identifying and supporting those at risk of non-progression.

Technical definitions underpin institutional and national datasets on student retention and progression and are linked to the traditional milestones of progression from year one to year two, and so on. New entrants and their progression to year 2 are of particular interest, for the reasons described earlier in this section. More generally, there is a gap in reporting on progression rates across the student lifecycle.

The HEA measures progression rates through two indicators, as follows: a student is deemed to have progressed if they are present in the same institution in the following academic year. In addition, a student is deemed to have transferred if they are identified as present in a different HEI in the following academic year.[12] In practice, the HEA reports data on transferred students within reporting on student progression rates since this is now a better fit with some of the changes in evidence.

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[8] The term intervention as used in this report, means the subject of the HEI case studies, that is, a project, initiative, programme, strategy or policy intentionally designed by a HEI to support student retention and progression and to reduce non-progression.

[9] See https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/publications/student-part-time-fee-scheme-for-specified-undergraduate-courses-2024-information-q-a/

[10] The common concepts/terminology related to student progression include, inter-alia: access, withdrawal, dropout, attainment, retention, engagement, progression, non-progression, completion, student success.

[11] For example, see https://advance-he.ac.uk/teaching-learning/student-access-retention-attainment-and-progression-higher-education

[12] See https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/progression/report/

The technical definitions underpinning the measurement of student progression shape strategic approaches to the selection of HEI intervention types and target groups. Moreover, the definitions and concepts or terminology in use are associated with critical perspectives on student retention and progression. As is clear in this subsection, these perspectives are not fixed and change as evidence-based interventions are informed by the lessons learned from practice in Irish HEIs and as new perspectives on the factors that are important to student success emerge through research. Traditional quantitative data on student progression will be more useful to HEI intervention design when combined with individual, institutional, and situational data and analysis.

2.3 Exploring Irish HEI Case Studies

In early 2024, the HEA hosted a conference, which provided a platform for HEIs to examine these issues in depth, including at the level of intervention implementation. Attendees including policymakers, HEI representatives, students, and employers engaged with findings from the HEA's analysis of first-year undergraduate non-progression rates (2016/17 to 2021/22), alongside insights from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) study on non-progressed HE students conducted in 2021 (CSO, 2024). The HEA produced a conference report following the event, which summarised the key themes identified by participants (HEA, 2024b).

Transitions into higher education emerged as a critical factor, with discussion emphasising the need for improved guidance counselling at second level, clearer information on educational pathways, and early interventions that support students at risk of withdrawal. The student experience, including engagement levels, financial pressures, and access to accommodation, was another area of concern, with participants highlighting long commute times, financial insecurity, and difficulty in securing housing, as factors negatively impacting on student retention. Participants reinforced existing research indicating that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face additional barriers that limit their academic and social integration. Furthermore, participants discussed the role of institutional monitoring practices in evaluating progression initiatives. While some HEIs have established formalised tracking systems, such as student engagement analytics, others rely on decentralised approaches with varying levels of effectiveness. Understanding how institutions assess and refine their interventions is critical for identifying gaps and to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of student support policies.

The conference participants also underscored the importance of data-driven decision-making, calling for greater data-sharing between state agencies, greater transparency in progression tracking, and enhanced benchmarking mechanisms against OECD counterparts.

Finally, it was clear through the discussions that there is a growing body of evidence available from Irish HEIs implementing novel interventions for student progression. In order to learn from these practices and to bridge a 'know–do' gap in effective intervention design, implementation and evaluation, in early 2025, the HEA invited 17 HEIs to submit examples, using a template provided. The template sought to capture and to demonstrate contemporary case studies of intervention practice for student retention and progression and reducing non-progression. The resulting case studies and their analysis form the basis for this report.

3. Methodology

This report applies a structured approach to analysing student progression initiatives across Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The methodology is designed to systematically analyse case study data, identify emerging trends, and evaluate institutional approaches to monitoring and improving student retention and progression. The analysis is primarily qualitative, integrating established frameworks for thematic categorisation and comparative analysis. The dataset comprises 42 case studies from 16 HEIs, representing a diverse range of institutional interventions aimed at improving student progression and reducing non-progression.

The collected case studies vary in scope, with institutions reporting between one and five individual interventions each. It is important to note here that the examples provided exclude a wider breadth of activities and interventions for student progression. In addition, the information provided, of necessity given the template format, provides a partial rather than a full picture of some interventions.

The analysis focuses on initiatives submitted by traditional universities, technological universities, and specialist colleges, and where observed, examines how the different types of HEIs approach student retention and progression.[13] To ensure a systematic comparison, case studies were examined to reveal initial trends and categorised accordingly for the purpose of segmentation. This segmentation allows for comparative analysis across institution types and facilitates the identification of cross-case study thematic trends. A rigorous text analysis approach was then applied to assess patterns and to identify themes within the case study dataset.

The following steps were undertaken:

1. Pre-processing: Standardising textual data by removing any formatting inconsistencies, resolving synonyms, and ensuring consistency in categorisation.
2. Trend Analysis (based on segmentation and initial theme identification): Extracting and quantifying recurring patterns across HEIs to identify common approaches to student progression.
3. Comparative Analysis: Mapping thematic and structural differences across HEI types to understand variations in institutional progression strategies.
4. Evidence-Informed Practices: Aligning and organising case study findings to model and describe features of effective interventions as learning of use to any Irish HEI planning to design and implement an intervention on student progression.
5. Insights for Future Practice: Identifying gaps, summarising key lessons and demonstrating some examples from the HEI case studies, which encompass some of the features and themes explored in the report.

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[13]   The term 'technological university' is used in this report to refer to both technological universities and institutes of technology, while 'traditional universities' is used with reference to the seven previously established universities and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). The term 'specialist college' includes the National College of Art and Design and Mary Immaculate College.

The report examines progression initiatives in relation to existing research and policy frameworks, offering evidence-informed insights to support the HEA Policy Forum and HEI institutional decision-making.

3.1 Some limitations

The authors of this report acknowledge the limitations to the analysis of the HEI case studies that form the basis to the report and, as a result, to the conclusions and insights presented. Irish HEIs contributed a large number (42) of individual case studies by completing a template prepared and issued by the HEA in consultation with the Policy Forum. By design, HEIs selected and submitted their good practice examples, so that the report provides a snapshot view only of self-selected HEI practices on student progression.

Many, although not all, interventions were new practices recently implemented, so that monitoring and evaluation data were often not available. In general, monitoring and evaluation processes were not well described in the case studies. Some HEI contributors noted that they found it challenging to evidence a causative link between the individual intervention and improvements (or lack of improvement) in student retention and progression figures.

Gaps also emerged as a result of the template structure. The distinction between the two main categories 'supporting retention and progression' and 'reducing non-progression' may not have been sufficiently defined to draw out a clear difference between these aims on the part of HEIs. As another example, information on the evidence base for intervention design and specification was not specifically requested, which meant that it was challenging to identify some interventions as evidence-based.

More practically, it also meant that there was then less of a focus in the case studies on discussing questions of fidelity of implementation, relative to the evidence base. In addition, questions on the barriers and enablers mediating intervention design, resourcing, and implementation were not requested but would have added important information to the analysis, and to the report conclusions.

Moreover, the links between the individual case study and other interventions with a similar objective were not provided, so that the analysis and report is missing a broader context and typology of interventions on student retention and progression within the individual HEI.

These limitations are comprehensible in the light of the HEA aim for the analysis and report to form just one component of an ongoing collation of evidence on student retention and progression. Moreover, the value of the findings is anchored in the structured and systematic approach adopted by the HEA to gathering case studies. These fill an important gap in the available information on HEI intervention practices, on the basis of a cross-case, comparative analysis of good practices self-selected by HEIs.

To ensure that qualitative case studies continue to contribute evidence-informed practice to support the design and delivery of quality interventions on student retention and progression, the report authors propose that some case studies, as well as dimensions of good practice that were insufficiently covered in the case studies, are explored in the next stage of the research.

4. Analysis

The analysis section of this report examines case studies of student progression interventions in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs), assessing their focus on retention and non-progression. It explores institutional contexts influencing initiative design, implementation strategies, target cohorts, objectives, expected outcomes, resourcing, and monitoring mechanisms. Thematic patterns in intervention approaches are introduced, as are any differentiating factors across institution types, providing an early insight into variations in student progression and retention strategies.

The first subsection introduces the case studies, giving a high-level view of the main differentiating characteristics, trends, and themes. The following subsections present a narrative of the information provided under each of the main subsections of the questionnaire completed by the HEIs. These are:

- **Overview and context** — the background to development of the initiatives (the 'why')
- **Aims and objectives,** how the initiative was implemented, their aims and objectives (the 'how')
- **Resourcing** of the intervention
- **Oversight** — reporting, monitoring and assessment of impact.

The final subsection summarises the analytic themes emerging from cross-case study analysis.

4.1 The case studies in brief

As noted, 16 Irish HEIs submitted 42 case studies of interventions dedicated to student retention and progression. Respondents were asked a series of questions about the initiatives that sought to broadly determine the reasons for their development, to describe the way in which they were implemented, the intended outcomes achieved, and the systems in place to monitor the effectiveness of the intervention.

The HEI respondents categorised interventions according to two fundamental types. These were: (1) interventions implemented to promote progression and retention, and (2) interventions that aimed to address non-progression rates. In total, 26 of the 42 initiatives (61.9%) were identified by the respondent HEIs as being intended to positively impact both the promotion of progression and retention, and to address non-progression rates.

Just two initiatives (4.8%) were explicitly categorised as addressing non-progression, while 13 (30.9%) were categorised as solely promoting retention and progression. One initiative was not categorised by the respondent; however, this initiative had many aspects most similar to those intended to promote retention and progression and is included within this group. Figure 1 below shows the number of HEI interventions associated with the main intervention purpose.

Figure 1: Number of HEI interventions by main intervention purpose.
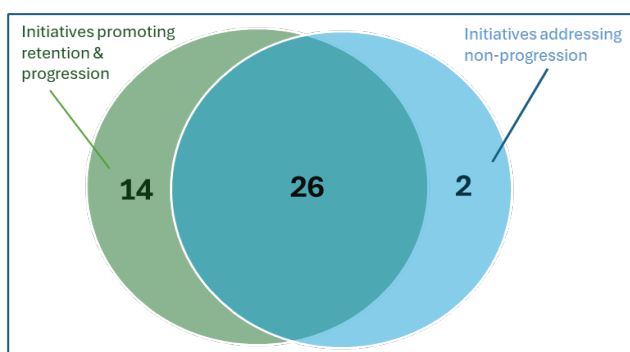
For both traditional universities and specialist colleges, the majority of initiatives provided by respondents were identified as promoting progression and retention, with initiatives targeting non-progression being in the minority. Technological universities did not display this pattern because all but one initiative was identified with both categories. The dividing line between initiatives within these two categories is somewhat blurred, although the distinctions that do exist will be explored throughout this report. The following subsections are aligned with the questionnaire pathway, to draw out details of the case studies and to analyse them in relation to each other and across institution type.

The following sections follow the logic of the questionnaire narrative and examine the key trends shaping student retention and progression initiatives, drawing out thematic patterns. The analysis highlights how institutions strategically balance broad institutional approaches with smaller-scale, programme-specific interventions. Early intervention emerges as a crucial strategy, typically, offering structured orientation programmes and academic support to ease new entrant transition. Institutions vary in their approach to transition, with some HEIs focusing on new entrants, while others prioritise data-led student monitoring for non-progression risk and targeted outreach. There are also examples within the case studies of interventions dedicated to other transition points; for retention post-exam failure, for example, or to support transition to professional careers.

The analysis also shows a trend for pilot initiatives intended for scaling relative to mainstream programmes embedded within institutional frameworks and associated with different sources of funding. Reducing barriers to student success remains a central consideration for HEIs, with diverse approaches to defining and identifying barriers. Such interventions tackle financial obstacles, foster inclusive teaching practices, and support equity of access to support services.

Additionally, the ways HEIs approach student participation — through auto-enrolment or self-selection — affect engagement levels and intervention effectiveness. The challenge associated with assessing the impact of individual interventions on student progression rates is revealed in the analysis of this section of the case study questionnaire.

4.2 Student progression case studies: patterns and perspectives

In the following subsections, the information provided by HEIs in the 42 case studies is explored under each of the main sections of the questionnaire; overview and context, aims and objectives, resourcing, and oversight.

4.2.1 Overview and context

What is clear in the progression data for Ireland is that there are many factors involved in student progression, including personal, social, economic, and institutional. These factors inform the development of initiatives aimed at promoting progression and retention, as well as addressing non-progression. Respondents to the HEA questionnaire, therefore, provided contextual indicators as to the particular challenges faced by their student bodies when detailing reasons for the development of their individual interventions. As such, in developing the interventions, HEIs attempted to address specific challenges rooted in their institutional environments, student demographics, and external circumstances. These challenges often stemmed from systemic issues, structural barriers, or feedback identifying areas for improvement within their practices and policies.

Across all institution types, certain similarities and differences emerged. Commonly, the context in which initiatives emerged included a focus on the first few weeks of new entrants' student life, identified by many as the most critical transition period, underlining the importance of early interventions to enhance retention. For example, the University of Limerick (UL) designed its F7W programme to provide structured support during the initial weeks of university life, ensuring students feel academically and socially integrated.

The importance of promoting a sense of belonging among students was identified by many HEIs, and the first weeks and semester of their studies tended to be the focus of these 'first' acculturalisation, socialisation, and academic skills development interventions.

In spite of the commonalities, distinct differences were evident in the context in which interventions for student progression were developed. Traditional universities were more likely to be motivated by the need to address broad institutional barriers affecting large student populations. Their initiatives often emerged in response to data-driven evaluations revealing critical gaps in progression rates or retention. For instance, Dublin City University (DCU) adopted Power BI in 2019 to enhance oversight of progression trends and benchmark performance against national data, reflecting the HEI's strategic priority to improve the overall student experience.

Other initiatives at traditional universities, like Maynooth University's 'My Maynooth on Moodle,' were designed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (a significant contextual factor for all HEIs), which disrupted traditional orientation processes and catalysed a need for flexible and accessible solutions for student integration. It offered a modular, self-paced online orientation programme designed to introduce new students to academic and personal development resources. The LevelUp Digital Skills Hub (DSH) programme at UL also attempted to provide a structured approach to digital skill development for students across nine modules, responding to identified barriers to effective academic engagement due to a lack of digital skills.

These programmes highlight a widely held institutional view that the initial period of university enrolment is a pivotal time to engage students and prevent withdrawal. Feedback from students played a central role; Trinity College Dublin's expansion of its counselling services emerged as a response to students reporting academic distress and loneliness as major obstacles to their progression.

Technological universities developed interventions that responded to the practical realities and challenges faced by a diverse and often non-traditional student cohort. These institutions also recognised transitional periods as critical moments that require interventions. For example, Technological University of Shannon (TUS) created the 'Connect & Engage Programme' to address difficulties in transitioning to university life and re-engaging students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence showed that issues like social isolation, financial stress, and a lack of engagement were common among students, and this is therefore an important driver in developing initiatives. Similarly, South East Technological University (SETU) expanded peer mentoring programmes to foster social connection and help students adapt to their new environment, addressing the essential need for a sense of belonging identified through both institutional data and broader research.

Specialist colleges designed initiatives to address challenges experienced by the student body, particularly to support students' return to in-person lectures following the pandemic. One institution, for instance, introduced a 24/7 mental health platform to support student wellbeing. These institutions often developed interventions with an eye to meeting the needs of specialised cohorts or addressing niche challenges aligned with their disciplinary focus.

Across all HEIs, the reasons for developing these initiatives were rooted in their distinct contexts and priorities. Whether addressing systemic issues identified through data, responding to student feedback, or adapting to external crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs aimed to mitigate the risk of non-progression and improve retention by creating environments that support student success. The development of a positive academic and social culture is at the core of many initiatives across institution type; however, it is most prominent in technological university initiatives, possibly due to the fact that they are newer institutions in terms of their organisational structures and new institutional brandings. Overall, the initiatives reflect a commitment to tackling the root causes of academic and social barriers to retention and progression and fostering protective factors, such as enhancing engagement and belonging.

Addressing the specific contextual factors related to their institutions, HEIs employ a range of methods to enhance student retention and progression, some of which have been mentioned above. A close analysis of these initiatives demonstrates key thematic trends in how institutions design and implement their strategies to address these critical challenges. A recurring method across HEI intervention types is the use of peer-led mentoring systems to foster social integration and provide guidance to first-year students. Initiatives such as Trinity's Student2Student (S2S) and MIC's Peer Mentoring Project attempt to leverage the experiences of students from later years to support their newer peers.

Data-driven approaches also predominate, with institutions increasingly integrating analytics into their retention strategies. DCU's Power BI dashboards exemplify this trend, enabling the university to monitor progression and academic performance on a continuous basis via a user-friendly platform. Similarly, the UCD LEAP programme applies engagement data to proactively identify students at risk of disengagement as part of an early intervention approach.

Institutions also demonstrate a commitment to addressing specific student cohorts or demographic groups through tailored interventions. For example, the University of Galway's initiative to monitor the engagement of Irish Traveller and Roma students reflects a targeted approach to identifying and reducing barriers to progression among under-represented communities. At RCSI, the Universal Design framework and placement accommodations aims to support students with disabilities, ensuring equitable access to professional training environments.

Another method identified within the case studies is the integration of academic and non-academic supports into a cohesive framework. For instance, the Learner Success Toolkit at TUS aims to align academic support with Universal Design principles to cater to diverse learning needs. Similarly, the MTU Academic Learning Centre (ALC) Summer Programme consolidates various support services under a single initiative to assist students repeating exams or assessments, addressing both cognitive and non-cognitive barriers to progression.

4.2.2 Aims and objectives

A key theme across many HEIs is the use of data-driven insights in implementing the initiatives. Several HEIs developed dashboards that allowed tracking of student progression, refining data accuracy at the programme level, including the aforementioned Power BI at DCU.

The development of the Power BI dashboard was an iterative process, with refinements and enhancements made after each exam period. Student progression data were then used to redesign the dashboard itself to provide more accurate, usable data at the programme level.

Other traditional universities, such as the University of Galway, integrate tools like the Early Alert System (EAS 2.0) that approximate engagement levels through weighted data. For that initiative, data are identified as a key enabler for targeting early non-engagement by students, to gain insights for early intervention and deliver targeted outcomes. By aggregating data from three existing repositories, the University of Galway is able to capture weekly activity indicators such as Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) activity, lab and lecture attendance as well as CAO points; indicators informed by evidenced-based best practice literature.

The University of Galway decision-making tool approximates a student's level of engagement each week throughout the semester. The weighted engagement scores are then combined with the student's recorded contact details, affording the Access Centre a broad and informed insight to the individual student's engagement activity and patterns to monitor activity disruption. The Access Centre's post-entry support team then review the student's dashboard to verify their engagement and propose interventions, where deemed appropriate.

An important characteristic of the Early Alert System is that it continually uses data to provide up-to-date information on a regular basis. Similar data-based initiatives focused on post-exam periods can be further categorised into those that encompass the whole student population (e.g. Power BI at DCU) or those targeting students with higher non-progression rates.

Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), for example, developed an exam results analysis programme for Access students, which targets at-risk groups (such those attending the institution through its Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), Access TU Dublin, and Access Foundation programmes), reviewing their performance, and identifying those facing challenges for pro-active, targeted support.

Some of the data-driven initiatives do not require initial engagement by the students themselves but rather use data to identify those students who might benefit from more intensive supports from the HEI. These types of initiative are in the minority, and require more complex systems, both in terms of data aggregation and coordination of support systems.

Open supports, however, are common across institution types. These can be defined as interventions that deliver a range of both academic and non-academic supports to students, and which are not auto enrolled. In these interventions, academic supports are seen as a way to provide increased assistance to students that may be struggling with their coursework and who need additional tutoring. The Centre for Transformative Learning (CTL) in UL, is one such example. CTL implements five learner support centres as part of an initiative to develop academic supports for students. The centres include a Science Learning Centre, a Mathematics Learning Centre, an ICT Learning Centre, a regional Peer-Supported Learning Centre, and a regional Writing Centre. Each of the centres is dedicated to helping students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Personalised student support initiatives are also common. Traditional universities rely on structured mentorship programmes and targeted outreach campaigns for students who received non-progression grades as well as personalised intervention strategies, particularly in disciplines requiring clinical placements, ensuring tailored support for student success. Technological universities integrate structured mentoring and first-year support programmes while using digital tools and social media to reach students. This technology-enhanced learning and information dissemination is playing a significant role in student retention efforts across HEIs.

Technological universities also incorporate online learning hubs, interactive modules, and structured engagement strategies embedded within their curricula. Digital engagement tools, attendance tracking systems, and online mentorship programmes are also leveraged to create proactive interventions.

Institutional collaboration and student input is intended to ensure that initiatives are responsive to student needs. Several HEIs consult with faculty councils and student representatives to refine intervention measures. For example, as part of SETU's implementation of its P2P programme, consultation took place with academic departments and the student engagement team. A review of progression data for departments was considered and a department was chosen to pilot the programme. This was reviewed, with changes implemented as a result, before becoming an institution-wide programme, where SETU adopted the Transition+ model of peer mentoring based on an understanding of best practice in supporting transition and retention.

HEIs conduct extensive consultations, incorporating student feedback surveys and international benchmarking into their intervention planning and development process. This collaborative approach aims to continually refine initiatives so that they align with evolving needs.

For example, the TUS Connect and Engage programme was implemented using a data-driven and student-informed approach, incorporating institutional data on student retention, engagement trends, and feedback from student and staff stakeholders. As part of the programme's development and implementation, students, the Students' Union, faculty, and student support services were consulted to tailor the programme to student needs. Practices from national and international higher education institutions with successful student engagement models were also considered in its development. A dedicated social media strategy using Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and LinkedIn providing timely updates, has been implemented to encourage participation and create interactive student experiences

alongside more traditional communication tools such as email and Moodle. The programme is broadly accessible with both in-person and online components designed to be inclusive and engaging.

Another important dimension of implementation is time. How new the interventions were, and whether they are still in the pilot stage of development or have been implemented across the whole of the institution, are important considerations. The average implementation date across all forty-two initiatives was the 2018/2019 academic year, with the average initial implementation date for technological universities and specialist college interventions typically being more recent — the 2021/2022 academic year.

Six of the forty-two initiatives are still in the pilot stage of their development, including the University of Galway's Early Alert System, the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) 'Onwards, Upwards, and Outwards' programme, and RCSI's 'Plus One' initiative. Figure 2 illustrates these differences in the number of interventions by year and by HEI type.

Figure 2: Number of interventions by year established and by HEI type
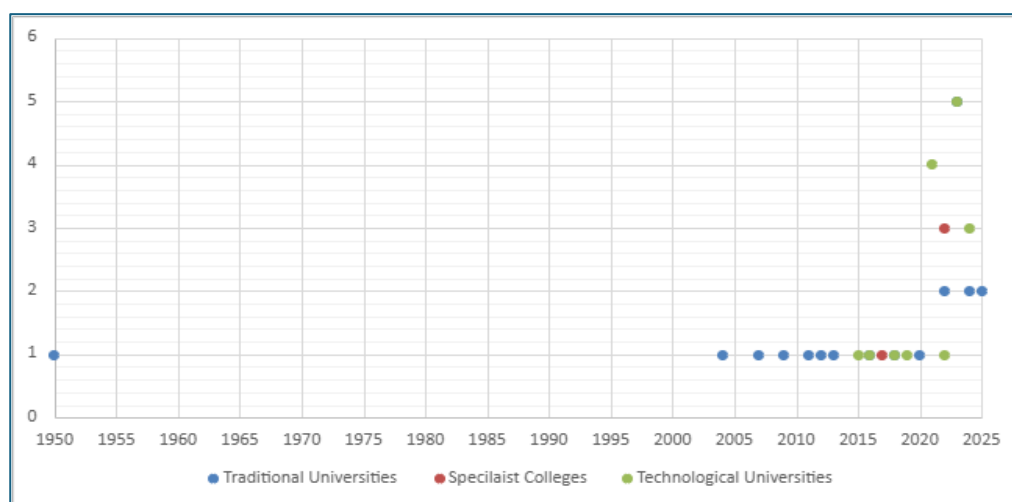
While similarities exist across institution types, minor distinctions in priorities emerge in the aims of the initiatives more broadly. Within technological universities, initiatives often aim to facilitate student transitions by fostering social connections and psychological belonging. Some interventions aim to provide structured, student-centred points of contact for online learners, ensuring accessibility and continuity from pre-entry through to graduation. There is a strong emphasis on campus-wide induction strategies that help incoming students to navigate academic expectations, registration, and support networks. Structured programmes promote well-being and self-reflection in first-year students, while supplemental exam support aims to ensure students received consistent guidance throughout assessment periods.

Interventions also include incentivised frameworks that recognise engagement across curricular and extracurricular activities, fostering long-term student success. Data-driven approaches underpin retention strategies, analysing progression patterns to inform effective academic support. Retention-focused workshops provide faculties with practical methodologies to improve student persistence, contributing to broader institutional benchmarks on retention rates.

Traditional universities implemented initiatives that prioritise achievement, progression, and retention, particularly among first-year students. Personalised academic advocacy programmes ensure that

students have access to guidance on academic and personal matters, including financial and health-related challenges. As discussed, intelligence frameworks track student success over time, providing data for targeted interventions. Orientation programmes enhance early engagement, while learner support centres foster academic excellence through accessible and inclusive assistance. There is a concerted effort to monitor engagement scores demonstrated in the case studies, applying timely interventions to reduce withdrawal rates. Outreach programmes extend institutional counselling services to proactively support student success. Digital transformation strategies integrate technological advancements to improve learning accessibility and student engagement.

Traditional universities also emphasise social inclusion, addressing barriers faced by under-represented student groups through tailored support mechanisms. RCSI's 'Plus One' initiative aims to reduce barriers to industry placements for students with disabilities. The initiative captures feedback through consultations with students and clinical placement provider feedback. The information gathered both informs the institution in the design of its teaching and supports placement providers to be more inclusive and to identify existing barriers.

Interventions aim to combat social isolation by creating support networks, by providing peer allies, staff advocates, and communication channels. Those addressing clinical practice challenges attempt to ensure students have opportunities to share experiences with placement providers, promoting inclusive practices. Targeted interventions identify academic hurdles within first-year studies and mitigate barriers to retention and progression. Mental health initiatives expand the availability of support mechanisms for students facing psychological difficulties, while structured workshops equip faculty members to respond effectively to students in distress. Programmes also focus on improving academic efficiency, ensuring students receive the necessary resources to meet their course requirements effectively.

In response to the HEA survey, a majority of HEIs specified objectives and actions to help ensure the effective implementation of interventions and the achievement of overall aims. There were, however, some initiatives that did not have objectives and associated actions, though those were few and may have been the result of HEIs not having the information to hand and/or inputting errors.

4.2.3 Resourcing

Respondents provided details on the resourcing of initiatives, outlining the staffing structures and funding sources that supported these efforts. Across all HEI types, staffing resources vary from dedicated project leads and specialised officers to voluntary academic contributors, with funding drawn from a mix of core institutional budgets and external, strategic funding.

Staffing across HEIs reflect a combination of permanent roles, temporary assignments, and voluntary contributions, the latter being prominent in peer mentoring initiatives. Common across many initiatives is a reliance on structured funding sources, such as provided by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), which help to sustain long-term student retention projects.

Traditional universities tend to rely on structured support through appointed officers responsible for data collection, reporting, and targeted interventions, alongside faculty members who participate in student tutoring. Centralised student support teams ensure broad institutional oversight, with designated individuals managing orientation programmes and learning support centres. Some initiatives are facilitated through temporary staffing arrangements, such as micro-internships and short-term project-specific roles supported by strategic funding sources. For instance, Maynooth University's 'My

Maynooth on Moodle' initiative was resourced through the Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) 2022 funded 'Thrive Initiative', which provided financial support for the recruitment of a Student Success Officer and the renumeration of 'micro-interns', as well as for the production costs of student videos central to the initiative.

Similarly, in the technological universities, the P2P programme at SETU employs graduate ambassadors, allowing students who have completed their studies within the previous two years to bring innovative perspectives to the initiative. Additionally, cooperative education placements in the CTL Digital Skills Development initiative at the University of Limerick (UL) enable students to gain real-world experience in structured work environments for six to seven months.

These temporary staffing models, funded through strategic grants and institutional allocations, serve as flexible resources for student engagement and support initiatives. Several initiatives incorporate graduate ambassador positions and discipline-aligned advisors into their frameworks, utilising a blend of structured coordination and academic oversight to implement student success programmes. Specialist colleges often allocate staffing from existing institutional roles, emphasising collaborative contributions from faculty and student welfare teams. Training facilitators and peer mentors play an integral role in supporting initiatives ensuring student engagement mechanisms are effectively implemented through structured guidance.

Funding sources for retention and progression initiatives display significant variation across HEIs, with core institutional funds providing the foundation for long-term sustainability. Traditional universities commonly leverage central funds for operational costs, with additional allocations derived from external, strategic funds to help sustain specific student support initiatives. In some cases, this reflects the fact that the intervention has been in place for a long period of time. For instance, the Senior Tutor's Office at Trinity College operates through central funding, with discretionary teaching and research funds available for Tutors. Some disbursements, such as the Student Assistance Fund (SAF), are supplemented through philanthropy and charitable donations.

Other programmes blend core funding with external grants to sustain activities. The CTL Digital Skills Development Initiative relies on funding through the HEA (HCI and SATLE) and also institutional resourcing. Temporary funding models also play a role in staffing and initiative continuation. As mentioned, the SATLE 2022-funded 'Thrive' Initiative provides financial resources for the recruitment of a Student Success Officer, student micro-interns, and student-produced content. Moreover, the resourcing of institutional research activities associated with student progression originally stemmed from HEA project funds but, in this case, a temporary institutional resource was introduced after those funds ceased.

Technological universities often adopt a blended funding model, combining performance-based funding awards with strategic sectoral grants to develop academic support mechanisms. Certain interventions moved on from temporary external funding and gained core institutional resources, signalling their integration into longer-term institutional strategies. Specialist colleges often embed their initiatives within core budgets, utilising staff expertise within existing departmental allocations. External funding supplements targeted interventions, particularly in areas such as inclusive academic practices and student mental health support.

A high-level comparative analysis of HEI types indicated that traditional universities tend to maintain structured operational staffing models, relying on a combination of centralised institutional funds and

external contributions, while technological universities tend to integrate dedicated advisory roles within faculty structures, utilising strategic grants to support initiative rollout. Specialist colleges utilise institutional collaboration, incorporating faculty-led efforts within existing departmental functions.

4.2.4 Oversight

The reported impact of initiatives highlighted both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. While several initiatives demonstrate measurable success in improving student retention, engagement, and academic performance, others were too new to offer definitive conclusions regarding their long-term impact. Many interventions relied on qualitative feedback mechanisms to gauge student satisfaction and engagement, while others utilised statistical analysis to track progression rates. However, gaps in monitoring and evaluation practices hindered comprehensive assessment and evidence of effectiveness.

Across HEIs, documented impacts suggest improvements in student retention rates, academic progression, and engagement with support structures. Traditional universities report positive developments, with examples such as the Tutorial Service at Trinity College, which assisted 3,246 students in navigating academic processes, appeals, and deferrals during the 2023/24 academic year. However, while the stated impact of the initiative shows the increased reach of the initiative, the impact of its interventions on retention and progression rates is not specified or evidenced.

University College Cork (UCC) details a case study of an intervention that allows for first-year students to change their course within the first three weeks of semester one, subject to the priority of the CAO Waiting List. Improved progression rates were expressly tied to the initiative, introduced in 2012, since which UCC reports a 3% improvement for first years progressing to the second semester. Overall retention and progression rates of first-year students is currently at 92%.

Technological universities provide similarly encouraging results, particularly in peer mentoring and targeted student engagement efforts. The P2P initiative at SETU reports that 90% of mentees felt more confident about completing their courses, while 88% acknowledged that the programme helped them integrate socially. In broader student support efforts, organisational structures such as ATU's Online Student Advisor initiative, which handles over 37,000 interventions in a year, contributing to improved onboarding, retention, and the representation of student voices in the implementation of the initiative.

All HEIs report tailored interventions that address student inclusion, mental health, and academic progression. For instance, NCAD's First-Year Studies Experience initiative contributed to a decline in resit rates from 5% to 1% over a three-year period. Other interventions highlight positive qualitative feedback, particularly in workshops designed to equip staff to respond effectively to student distress. However, several HEIs report interventions are in the early stages of implementation, requiring further data collection to determine their impact.

Efforts related to placement support, inclusive teaching approaches, and digital accessibility indicate strong potential but lack long-term evaluative frameworks. As noted, many initiatives are still in the early phases of development limiting the ability to determine their effectiveness conclusively. For example, certain interventions in specialist colleges, such as universal design practices in placements, have yet to undergo comprehensive evaluation, though the respondents state that their theoretical foundations suggest improvements in student satisfaction. Similarly, within technological universities, some data-gathering efforts remain nascent, with monitoring mechanisms still being refined to assess engagement outcomes.

Another limitation in assessing the impact of retention and progression initiatives is an inconsistency in monitoring and evaluation practices. Some HEIs acknowledged the challenge of attributing causality in retention improvements, stating that while attrition rates have declined, it is difficult to attribute these changes directly to specific initiatives.

Several programmes rely on engagement metrics, satisfaction surveys, and attendance rates, which provide useful insights with respect to assessing immediate reactions and short-term results. Others indicate a reliance on anecdotal evidence or qualitative feedback without structured mechanisms to validate findings. Dashboard tools, while valuable for real-time monitoring, are often used for operational rather than evaluative purposes, limiting their function in structured impact assessments. Additionally, the irregularity of reporting cycles and a reliance on pilot-based evaluations restricts consistency in long-term intervention tracking.

Few HEIs captured medium-term results in terms of behavioural, skills or practice related change. With regard to more long-term academic outcomes or the causal relationships between the initiatives and retention and progression rates, understandably these are much more difficult to measure, which is acknowledged by several HEIs. Across all HEIs, initiatives are commonly reported to academic councils, university executive teams, or specialised subcommittees overseeing student engagement and institutional strategy. Institutional reports recognise that further refinement of evaluation frameworks is necessary to ensure interventions are evidence-based, align with strategic priorities, and inform leadership decision-making for continuous improvement.

Overall, while many initiatives demonstrate promising outcomes in supporting student retention and progression, the challenges associated with evaluating long-term impact remain. HEIs continue to adapt their strategies, incorporating feedback and refining monitoring tools to improve assessment methodologies. However, in the case studies, it was not clear that comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems are in place and the effectiveness of many programmes may be difficult to quantify with certainty.

4.3 Thematic analysis

Collectively, the case studies reveal a complex set of challenges and responses to student retention and progression across Irish HEIs. Each institution has made strategic choices regarding intervention design, balancing broad institutional approaches with smaller-scale, programme-specific efforts.

While **whole-of-institution** initiatives promote coherence and strategic alignment, department-level programmes address discipline-specific challenges. At the core of these efforts is a recognition that **early intervention** plays a vital role in ensuring student success, whether through structured orientation programmes or academic skills development.

Yet intervention strategies vary — not all initiatives focus on new entrants, nor do they uniformly address student progression through early identification. Instead, HEIs have adopted diverse approaches, from **pilot initiatives** designed for gradual expansion to mainstream programmes embedded within institutional structures. Some rely on **data-led** initiatives to track engagement and progression, including for **targeted interventions,** while others centre their design around qualitative student feedback and individualised mentoring. The choice of **enrolment type**, between auto-enrolment

and self-selection also shapes participation levels, determining whether support is based on an intervention model or accessed at a student's discretion.

Reducing barriers to student success is another important feature of some initiatives, with HEIs examining their institutional practices through the lens of retention and progression. Initiatives have included Universal Design frameworks for placements, and policy changes on exam re-sit fees demonstrate institutional efforts to remove obstacles that may hinder student progression.

The **funding source** has emerged as an important theme, and influences both the feasibility and sustainability of interventions. While external funding fuels innovation and focuses initiatives on certain cohorts or methods of intervention, the most enduring initiatives are likely to be those integrated into core institutional budgets. This interplay between strategic and institutional resourcing raises questions about long-term impact, particularly in cases where temporary funding sustains pilot projects without clear pathways to mainstream implementation. Similarly, inconsistencies in **monitoring and evaluation** frameworks suggest a need for greater alignment, ensuring interventions are not just well-intended but measurably effective in improving student progression rates.

Taken together, these themes underscore the evolving methodologies shaping student retention efforts. HEIs are not simply designing interventions but are actively responding to institutional and sector-wide challenges. The strategic choices they make, from intervention scope and funding models to participation structures, reflect broader shifts and priorities in higher education and in student progression. Understanding these patterns provides valuable insights into how institutions might refine their approaches, ensuring that student progression remains both a shared commitment and a measurable outcome.

5. Discussion

This section draws on the earlier analysis and the analytic themes identified in Section 4 on a cross-case study basis, for the purpose of generalising and sharing with others the learning from Irish HEI interventions on student progression. A practical approach to the discussion in each of the subsections aims to ensure that the utility of the analysis is enhanced for HEIs.

Areas of focal interest emerging through the analysis are modelled to align with the intervention lifecycle, so as to illustrate the processes that are relevant to strategic decision-making by HEIs and are important to intervention design and specification. In addition, the key features of effective interventions that support retention and progression and that identify and target students at risk of non-progression are described.

5.1 Modelling HEI interventions on student progression

Collectively, the analytic distinctions and trends that are described in the previous section offer valuable insights into the approaches and options for HEIs when establishing interventions to support student retention and progression. They reflect the available evidence, institutional contexts, strategic priorities, and evolving methodologies in higher education for student progression. Process models are useful in guiding the translation of analysis into practice. With a view to guiding future intervention design and specification, the analysis of the case studies can be usefully mapped to the intervention lifecycle.

On this basis, Figure 3 attempts to describe the reality of HEI interventions for student progression, as analysed through the cross-case study comparison. The conceptual map models the inter-relationships between the evidence base being applied, institution-level situational analysis, strategic decision-making by HEI leadership, and the development, implementation, and assessment of evidence-based interventions. It also signals the importance of robust monitoring and evaluation systems and a leadership culture of continuous improvement.

More specifically, further to the analysis, Figure 3 models the processes involved for any HEI aiming to design and specify interventions to support student retention and progression, and to reduce non-progression. In addition, the model suggests a typology of intervention type within each of these two categories.

Figure 3: Irish HEI interventions for student progression — a conceptual map
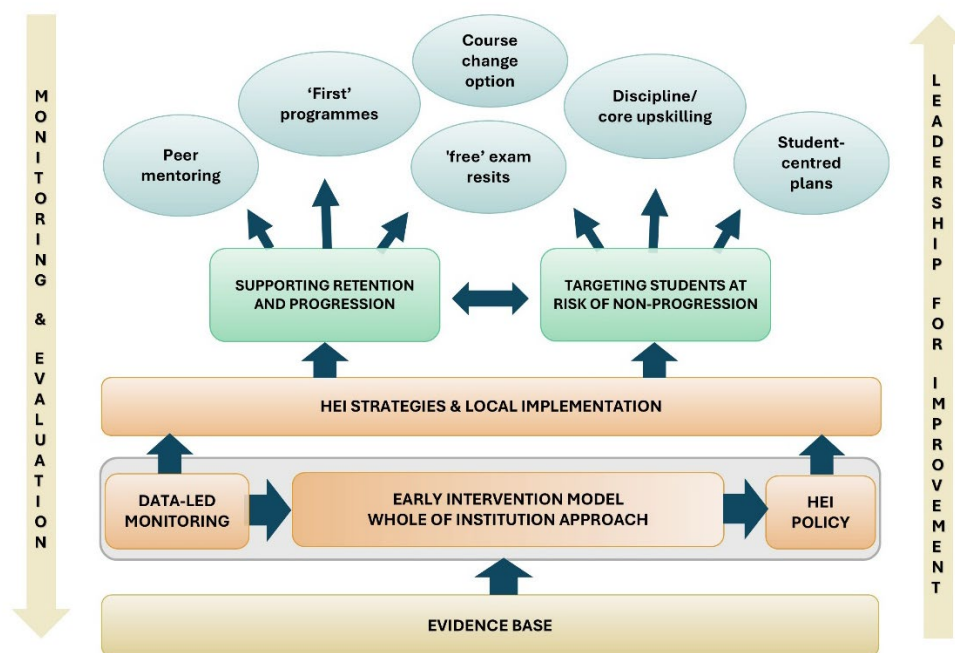
In practice, the map may be applied in process terms from the ground up. The core question is 'what is the intervention aiming to achieve?', which orients design effort to clarifying the HEI context and vision, deciding on the appropriate approach, specifying implementation and defining indicators of success. As processes, designed-in monitoring and evaluation frameworks facilitate institutional leadership in taking stock of progress and directing improvements as part of a plan-do-study-act cycle.

5.2 Strategic approaches to student progression

Many of the HEIs indicated that their interventions are evidence-based. Evidence-based practice is an approach to decision making that is transparent, accountable, and based on careful consideration of the most compelling evidence available about the effects of particular interventions on the welfare of individuals, groups, and communities. Evidenced-based, or evidence informed practice, is best described as a philosophy and process designed to advance effective use of professional judgement.

Typically, it involves the steps of formulating problems or questions, sourcing the best evidence to answer the question, critically appraising the evidence for validity, integrating the evidence with practice experience and specific contextual factors, taking action and then evaluating effectiveness. A logical sequence of steps. As understanding of the concept has evolved, the term 'evidence-based practice' has, in many instances, been replaced by 'evidence informed practice'. The latter is now commonly used to take account of the myriads of influences on practice operating within an organisational and wider environmental context, including policy, values and ideologies, organisational culture, resources and politics, practitioner skill and user views (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011).

In summary, better outcomes are achieved for student progression when evidence is applied effectively by skilled practitioners, further to situational analysis of the HEI context (Metz and Bartley, 2020). Implementation is a core dimension of the intervention lifecycle. The literature on evidence-based intervention design emphasises the need to apply an implementation lens to considering potential

barriers and enablers at the design stage and to implement evidence-based interventions with fidelity (Meyers et al, 2012). While many HEIs describe their interventions as evidence-based, few referenced an implementation guided by evidence on structured approaches, including a focus on processes of continuous improvement during implementation. It would be useful to gather more in-depth information on this area of intervention practice.

At the level of institutional decision-making, Irish HEIs present two main approaches to planning and designing interventions on student progression. Firstly, early intervention models represent a key approach. Early intervention means identifying and addressing the risk of non-progression at the earliest possible opportunity i.e. well in advance of annual examination or progression decisions (Gordanier et al, 2019). Drawing on systems thinking, early intervention models involve both addressing risk factors and maximising protective factors. The approach highlights the importance of coordinating the various actors with responsibility for the systems within the HEI that influence student progression and support students. It also accounts for the different personal, family, and social systems that intersect with the relevant institutional and academic systems.

In practice, early intervention initiatives demonstrate the following features:

- The 'early intervention' effective timeframe has been identified.
- Evidence of both risk and protective factors is available for the cohort.
- Engagement focuses on the strengths and decision-making of the individual.
- Supports are integrated by means of an active coordination between providers.

Irish HEIs submitted a number of case studies which implement early intervention models. These include, as some examples, IT projects which aim to generate or improve monitoring data, and 'first-year' programmes for new entrants, which focus on improving personal, social, and academic knowledge as protective factors. In addition, peer learning and peer mentoring interventions constitute strengths-based interventions. The authors believe that it would be useful to gather more practices from HEIs on how early intervention is linked to the delivery of student-centred, coordinated supports in the HEI, and how behavioural change is demonstrated as a result of student engagement more generally.

Secondly, a trend in favour of whole-of-institution approaches is evident across the case studies. A whole-of-institution approach involves the intentional acculturation within the HEI of a leadership vision for student retention and progression. A growing recognition of the importance of non-academic dimensions of student retention is clearly demonstrated in many of the Irish HEI case studies, as a key aspect of the approach. Several HEIs, for example, valorise personal as well as social dimensions as objectives of the interventions presented. More specifically, HEIs often highlighted the fostering of a strong sense of belonging at the cohort level as a key objective of the intervention, which accords with recent research (Mahoney et al., 2022). In addition, a further example of this approach was upskilling academic staff to better apply improved monitoring data.

In addition, the holistic character of the whole-of-institution approach frames HEI efforts to reduce barriers to student retention and progression. The inclusion of 'free' resits and opportunities to change academic programme constituted examples of reducing barriers to student progression on this basis. It is important to note that 'whole-of-institution' does not mean necessarily that the particular intervention is implemented on an institution-wide basis.

In summary, whole-of-institution approaches, typically, include the following features:

- A leadership vision exists at an institutional level and is expressed in policy.
- A cohort-level challenge and the main barriers to be addressed are identified.
- Stakeholders at all levels participate in acculturation of the vision.
- 'Open' interventions adopt a holistic view of the individual's needs.

Similarly to early intervention approaches, effective whole-of-institution approaches were also data-driven. In the case of whole-of-institution approaches, however, this involves the generation of data to demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach, as well as the effectiveness of the specific intervention. For example, identifying appropriate quantitative and qualitative result indicators that demonstrate the cultural and behavioural changes being achieved. As has been referenced elsewhere in the report, medium-term results, i.e. those associated with behavioural change, represented a gap in the performance and monitoring information provided in the case studies.

Institutional policies are critical to framing and guiding whole-of-institution approaches. They are the most direct expression of a leadership vision for student retention and progression. There is a valuable (UCD) case study on the development of institutional policy for student retention and progression. However, it would be useful to seek more information related to the influence of policy on acculturation of institutional student retention and progression aims, in particular, so as to transfer learning on this critical component of an institutional culture for student progression.

The HEI case studies reveal that coherent interventions for student progression are associated with strategic decisions made at the institutional level on the 'best fit' approaches and models for the particular HEI setting and context. The two presented here are not mutually exclusive and may successfully represent twin pillars of an institutional approach. The case studies highlight that achieving impact through evidence-based interventions is facilitated by a clarity of approach at institutional level and a leadership vision that shapes a HEI culture in favour of student retention and progression.

5.3 Supporting retention and progression

Irish HEIs are prioritising supporting retention and progression, typically, by means of interventions that are generally accessible to the wider student body or cohort. The HEA has identified a combination of higher education factors, socio-demographic factors, Leaving Certificate attainment, and secondary school factors as contributing to the non-progression outcomes of new entrants. Efforts to identify students at risk of non-progression, based on this cluster of factors, is driving IT projects that aim to produce institution-level data of use to supporting student retention and progression.

The literature on student retention and progression evidences a need to respect and to foster the potential for higher education to contribute to individual personal, social, and academic growth. Cultural change relevant to student progression represents a strong focus within many of the case studies on this basis and is in line with the available literature on good practice. There is also a strong focus on the experience of new entrants and the literature continues to valorise the importance of the first year in terms of the provision of holistic supports at this stage.

More specifically, research on the interplay of personal, socio-economic, and health determinants is driving person-centred and strengths-based HEI approaches to supporting retention and progression. A

gap here is evidence-informed practice on how these are implemented in practical terms within HEIs, and their impact. This is particularly relevant given improvements in targeting students at risk of non-progression, including through student engagement and enhanced monitoring processes.

In a context of intersecting or overlapping concepts associated with student progression, together with shifts in definitions and measurement, HEIs may struggle to establish strategic and intervention-level objectives that more precisely express their goals. For example, the distinction between supporting retention and progression or reducing non-progression is not always sufficiently clear.

As one example of practical effects, there is a gap in evidence-informed practice for pre-entry and co-creative collaborations between second level and higher education institutions, although such collaborations are indicated by the causal factors for non-progression. The report authors consider it possible that interventions that are more typically defined as access interventions may not have been included by HEIs on this basis.

This report has produced a model of evidence-informed practice through the lens of the intervention lifecycle. This may be useful to consider alongside the student-centred conceptualisation of withdrawal factors offered by Burroughs et al. (2015). In addition, there is also a need to model the range of intervention types better, similarly linking these logically to the causal factors of student non-progression. In the case studies, approaches such as early intervention and whole-of-institution are nominated, and these have a strong evidence base in the wider social policy and development literature. In addition, in HE, the term 'student success' represents a new kind of model, which defines the main enabling factors and helps to organise the supports provided to students.[14]

With reference to the types of intervention presented, the breadth shown in the case studies demonstrates the diverse intervention types that are referenced in the literature. On this basis, retention and progression interventions most often are:

- Grounded in evidence and aligned with current student progression concepts.
- Most typically, oriented to new entry cohorts and widely accessible.
- Conceived in broad terms as both supporting retention and progression and reducing non-progression, simultaneously.
- Applying a mixed strategy, addressing academic and non-academic issues.

Finally, the question of which interventions offer the most efficient mechanisms to support retention and progression in terms of resources (labour, time, financial) is highly relevant to HEIs but is not specifically addressed in the case studies. As one example, a peer learning intervention might be assumed to be efficient but is likely to require significant academic time and space. It would be useful for HEIs to contribute more information on the resourcing required for specific types of interventions.

5.4 Targeting students at risk of non-progression

The targeting of students most at risk of non-progression is a critical component of HEI student retention strategies. Good practice interventions with at-risk students emphasise early identification, structured

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[14] The HEA conducted a review of the National Framework for Student Success (2025). The review report and the Framework are available from: https://studentsuccess.teachingandlearning.ie/student-success-the-story-so-far/

support mechanisms, and reducing socio-economic and structural barriers to progression. The Irish HEI case studies demonstrate many of these features, so that they often identified the intervention as contributing to both supporting retention and progression and reducing non-progression.

A key difference between interventions targeting students at risk of non-progression, as compared to more generally applicable interventions for student progression, is that continuous monitoring is needed to identify students who are experiencing issues, throughout the academic lifecycle. Data-driven approaches, such as predictive analytics and engagement dashboards, enable Irish HEIs to flag students at risk and to implement timely interventions.

The use of the Early Alert System in the University of Galway exemplifies this approach, providing real-time data on student engagement and performance to inform targeted support strategies. Research suggests that institutions should integrate multiple data sources, including attendance records, assessment performance, and student feedback, to develop a comprehensive risk profile for early intervention (Tinto, 2012).

A further critical aspect of supporting at-risk students is ensuring that interventions are student-centred and integrated across institutional services, with the need for coordinated planning between academic departments, student support services, and faculty members to provide supports tailored to individual student needs.

One-to-one engagement and building relationships of trust between HEI academic and professional staff and those at risk of non-progression is vital. This is especially so in the case of those who are at risk of non-progression and who are also from marginalised and under-represented communities, or who may be otherwise identified as a cohort more likely to be at risk of non-progression. It would be useful to have more information from the relevant case studies at a more granular level in this regard.

As some examples of what might be usefully further explored; the models of practice used, defined risk thresholds, information on the content and monitoring of student action plans or use of other planning instruments, and information on how the various support offices within HEIs coordinate to respond to the actions included. The research also indicates that interventions should be designed to provide proactive outreach rather than relying on students to seek support independently, as at-risk students often disengage before accessing available resources (Yorke and Longden, 2004).

In the case studies presented, six are specifically oriented to targeting students at risk of non-progression in specific terms, and some key gaps are in evidence with respect to how targeted approaches to identifying those at risk are linked to more intensive supports, and the impact of these supports more specifically. Two of the eight targeted initiatives are still in a pilot phase, while five are being implemented across the whole institution.

The features of the targeted interventions for students at risk of non-progression include:

- In-depth situational analysis at the institutional level.
- Identification of cohorts at risk of non-progression amid close monitoring.
- Targeted, person-centred initiatives, spanning proactive identification to structured interventions at the local level.
- Delivery by skilled practitioners and coordination on a 'wrap-around' basis by a range of HEI support services.

Finally, strategic funding models also influence the sustainability of interventions targeting at-risk students, and more intensive interventions for this group are likely to need additional significant resourcing. More sustainable long-term resourcing is required rather than short-term funding measures for targeted interventions to reduce non-progression.

6. Recommendations for future insights

In this section, insights are summarised from the foregoing analysis and discussion, which may be explored further as part of sector-wide discussions. The seven main insights from the analysis and report for wider consideration are as follows:

Insight 1: Given changes to the context for the student experience and in the light of new perspectives available, it would be useful to review the range of concepts and terminology associated with student progression and, potentially, link these logically within a framework on student progression.

Insight 2: Moreover, since HEI policy for student progression expresses the leadership vision and main approaches presented in the case studies, it would be useful to learn more about how innovations in HEI policy for student progression are contributing to impacts at the level of intervention types and implementation practice.

Insight 3: The case studies tell a good news story about Irish HEIs commitment to innovating for student retention and progression. Interventions were wide-ranging, evidence-based and conforming to national themes. In addition, it would be useful to have more information on some intervention types, such as those focusing on course flexibility and related supports or the use of AI to support student progression, where these are available.

Insight 4: A range of novel IT projects are generating new information to support student retention and progression, and several such projects have been resourced through national funding. Since many are both recently established and current, there are further lessons to be learnt on their effectiveness and their contribution to resource efficiency.

Insight 5: With respect to the intervention lifecycle more specifically, while evidence-based interventions are driving intervention design and planning processes, there are gaps in the evidence of good implementation practice as presented in the case studies. In particular, how targeting of students at risk of non-progression is linked to the delivery of student-centred, integrated supports on a similar good practice basis.

Insight 6: In addition, some HEIs highlighted challenges to establishing monitoring and evaluation frameworks for interventions on student progression. This challenge may also be reflected in target setting, given that these are related in planning terms. The HEA Policy Forum could further consider effective monitoring and evaluation systems for interventions on student progression.

Insight 7: Finally, it was notable that HEIs were often undertaking similar types of intervention. There is scope for greater collaboration between HEIs designing and implementing interventions for student progression. As one example, when interventions are novel and may be trialled in one HEI with the specific aim of transferring to others. Similarly, there are multiplier effects to be

achieved when HEIs collaborate, maximising the use of the resources available through co-production.

The authors consider it likely that some of the answers to these insights may be available in the intervention practices and that the relevant information was not detailed in the completed case study template. In order to draw out the insights for future learning and to contribute to evidence-informed practice on student progression at a sectoral level, additional information may usefully guide Irish HEI practice in particular areas as part of next steps. This may extend the value of the case studies by drawing out examples of key trends, by illuminating some gaps in the information provided, and by further exploring context and institutional setting analysis.

Finally, the authors suggest that the following examples illustrate a useful approach to transferring the learning from the individual case studies in a series of accessible briefs, which cross-reference key themes and practice highlights. The example cases on student progression involve the following areas: data-led monitoring for targeting purposes, institutional policy development, a transition focus, a focus on retention, a new entrants programme, and peer learning, as follows:

Figure 4:   Supporting Student Academic Progression Policy at UCD

Figure 5:   The Plus One Programme at RCSI

Figure 6:   Academic Learning Centre (ALC) Summer Programme at MTU

Figure 7:   The First Year Studies Experience at NCAD

Figure 8:   Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) Programme at TU Dublin

Figure 9:   Faculty of Arts Student Workload Balance App at MIC

Figure 10:   Connect & Engage Programme at TUS.

More detail on these interventions is presented graphically in the following Figures 4–10. Each of the graphics describes the intervention, its relationship to the analytic themes, and the key highlights that are of general interest.

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

SUPPORTING STUDENT ACADEMIC PROGRESSION - POLICY

Whole of Institution

The development of a policy on academic progression provides a framework to ensure a consistent approach to support students whose academic progress is deemed unsatisfactory and to the management of responses to student interventions.

Purpose & Implementation

In recognising the many factors which may affect a student's academic progress, UCD established its policy on academic progress to provide a framework to guide the institutions approach to supporting students to maintain progress and identify those who may need additional support. A working group of the Academic Council Committee on Student Conduct and Capacity developed the policy and procedure following consultation with stakeholders, including chairs of governing boards. There are two elements to the initiative. The first is early interventions: School and college offices identifying and supporting students who may be at risk based on their performance. The second is a formal response process, through which faculty and staff are guided on the procedural steps to be followed where the formal review of a student's performance is triggered by three failed attempts to pass a module. Typical interventions, as outlined by the policy, include: mail alerts notifying students about failed module, and written requests for students to attend meetings to discuss their academic performance and progress and to determine other support needs that will enable successful academic progression.

KEY FEATURES

- **Whole of institution**
- **Mainstream**
- **Culture**
- **Development of framework**

AIMS & ACTIONS

The aims of the policy development were to ensure that responses to identified academic underperformance were applied in a fair and transparent manner, and to establish a suitable framework for the effective, consistent and timely identification and management of continuation issues that arose. It did this by ensuring a procedure for students to be given an academic plan and supports they can follow to get them back on track with their studies, setting out clear roles and responsibilities for implementing the process.

HIGHLIGHT

This initiative was the only submission focused on policy development. The development of a policy on responses to progression and retention is vital to the delineation of responsibility of various offices for programme actions and in establishing a clear sense of direction and framework for all relevant initiatives.

Figure 5: The Plus One Programme at RCSI

RCSI UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE
AND HEALTHSCIENCES

PLUS ONE

Reducing Barriers

The 'Plus-One' initiative aims to promote small changes and to provide tips to improve inclusivity and accessibility across the institutions own departments and in professional placement environments, with a particular focus on students who are registered with learning access requirements, including but not limited to, disabled students, mature students, and socio-economically disadvantaged students.

Purpose & Implementation

In developing the 'Plus One' initiative through the lens of Universal Design (UD), RCSI's Learning Access and Facilitation Service (LAFS) aimed to explore and implement strategies to combat barriers to the completion of professional placements that existed for persons with disabilities. The initiative involved capturing feedback through ongoing consultations with students and clinical placement providers, which then resulted in training upgrades for clinical placement stakeholders. This included advisory meetings with all schools that provided practice placements, in-house Universal Design training with RCSI staff members who coordinated placements, as well as workshops with specific placement cohorts. Student feedback on placement and academic experience is gathered by LAFS, collated, and reviewed for dissemination at trainings. Good practices are shared regularly with university staff, and monthly or quarterly meetings are held with each school to create a space for ongoing review of support, as well as promote consistency amongst them.

KEY FEATURES

- **Transition**
- **Pilot**
- **Targeted**
- **Reducing barriers**

RESOURCING & DEVELOPMENT

The initiativewassupportedby central funds to the Learning Access and Facilitation Service, and by funding allocated from the HEA's PATH 4 fund. Further development of the initiative aims to expand UD across all operations of the institution.

HIGHLIGHT

This initiative was one of the few examples of a HEI identifying barriers that exist within its current practices and determining ways to mitigate or remove those barriers where possible. Though it is small in scale, it aims to support students in both their academic and professional progression. It is also an example of an initiative identifying and integrating an evidence-based framework into a university's practices.

Figure 6: Academic Learning Centre (ALC) Summer Programme at MTU

MUNSTER TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC LEARNING CENTRE (ALC) SUMMER PROGRAMME

Retention

The ALC Summer Programme offers a cohesive, holistic support to students repeating exams and assessments in the August sitting by integrating various academic support services under one umbrella.

Purpose & Implementation

The initiative was developed to support student progression and to provide repeating students with an opportunity to link into positive supports at a time when they may be feeling overwhelmed, anxious or in need of additional tutoring. The project involved creating a single entry point where students can access all academic supports. This involved rebranding and restructuring the ALC to include subject supports, academic success coaching and the Navigate Learning development programme under one umbrella. By integrating the available supports and the related messaging the aim of the initiative was to positively support students at a time of challenge, reduce confusion and anxiety among students while providing a cohesive system of academic support, mentoring and encouragement at a significant danger point in a student's progress. The programme includes academic mentoring appointments, study skills workshops, exam preparation workshops, workshops around motivation and goal setting as well as subject specific supports in areas such as mathematics and statistics, economics, programming, accounting, and mechanics. The integration of coaching and mentoring into the summer programme was especially important for repeating students where challenges included non- cognitive factors such as anxiety and student attitudes towards learning.

KEY FEATURES

- **Whole of institution**
- **Mainstream**
- **Whole student body**
- **Self selection**
- **Post-fail initiative**

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In the four weeks of the summer 2024 period, there were 206 appointments for Academic Mentoring. 52% of these were repeating 1st year modules in the August sitting. There were 346 attendances at subject supports across Mathematics and Statistics, Chemistry, Mechanics, Programming, Accounting, Economics and Physics. There were 87 appointments for writing support on repeat assignments and 82 Academic Success coaching appointments. MTU, like many technological university initiatives used social media to disseminate relevant tips for repeating students and information on accessing services.

HIGHLIGHT

The initiative's strength lies in its whole student body approach and its focus on the post-fail period, where student progression is at its most vulnerable. Though retention and progression initiatives need to address initial entry into higher education and early interventions before fails occur, it is nonetheless crucial for the establishment of comprehensive post-fail supports with simple points of entry.

Figure 7: The First Year Studies Experience at NCAD

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN
THE FIRST YEAR STUDIES EXPERIENCE AT NCAD

Early Intervention

The First Year Studies Experience at NCAD is a series of targeted measures designed to enhance the first year student experience by fostering a culture of belonging and connectedness.

Purpose & Implementation

The initiative aimed to identify the systems or structures that were in place that may have contributed to the number of student fails and re-sits at the First Year Studies Examination Board and to pilot a series of interventions to improve the student experience and to support retention and progression. A series of interventions were piloted and reviewed over the course of the academic year and subsequently mainstreamed into a First Year Studies Experience at NCAD programme of activity. The interventions were identified through consultation with teaching staff, student surveys and in consultation with staff from Academic Affairs. The resulting intervention contained three approaches. The first was to manage and coordinate workload in terms of assessments. The scheduling of teaching and assessment across the modules in each semester was coordinated to support students in distributing their assessment workload without disrupting their engagement with programme delivery. The second part of the initiative was to group first years into smaller groups, called 'bays', for their first six weeks of classes to make it easier to form friendships. After the first six weeks each bay attends a weekly culture seminar so that there is a continued point of contact for the students. Finally, a comprehensive 'Learning to Learn' module supports students in their transition to higher education.

KEY FEATURES

- **Whole of institution**
- **Mainstream**
- **First year focus**
- **Auto-enrolled**
- **Reducing barriers**

IMPACT

The key mechanisms through which the effectiveness of the initiative was monitored were the First Year Studies Board and the Pre-Exam Board meetings. Regular and periodic monitoring of the initiative occurs and which has positive effect on initiative design. As a result, following the implementation of The First Year Experience interventions, the rate of student resit, as reported at NCAD's Exam Board, fell from 5% in 2016/17 to 3% in 2017/18, and to 1% in 2018/19.

HIGHLIGHT

The strength of the initiative lies in its comprehensive approach to culture building and transition support. The initiative demonstrated a direct focus in its objectives, basing each on clearly identified challenges, with coherent and logical actions outlined in order to achieve the desired results. It also incorporated an identification of existing barriers and was student- centred in its approach.

TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY DUBLIN

PEER-ASSISTED LEARNING PROGRAMME (PAL)

Peer Learning

The Peer-Assisted Learning Programme (PAL) pairs former students of the access and international foundation programmes with current students to support them with academic challenges.

Purpose & Implementation

The Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) involves weekly tutorial sessions run by former students of the Access & International Foundation Programmes at TUD for current students. The sessions are planned and timetabled to support students and help them find solutions to comprehension challenges with the course materials. The TU Dublin Access Foundation Programme is designed to encourage greater participation in tertiary education by under-represented socioeconomic groups, including mature adults with low prior educational attainment, and prepare them for undergraduate programmes. Similarly, International Foundation Students on this Programme tend to have language and acculturation challenges that can inhibit their learning and social interactions. Typically, PAL covers a total of 150 students, including mature students, international students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those with lower prior education, who are enrolled each year on the three TU Dublin Foundation Programmes. Ten PAL sessions are run per week over the year in Electronic Engineering, Computer Science Programming, Computer Science Networking, Marketing, Management, Fundamental Math, Intermediate Math and Advanced Math modules.

KEY FEATURES

- **Whole of institution**
- **Targeted**
- **Peer learning**
- **Assessed for contribution to progression rate**

EVIDENCE-BASED IMPLEMENTATION

The initiative wasoriginally createdaspart of a 3-year Action Research study into the effect of PAL on mature students. PAL leaders (former students that have progressed) are interviewed and trained in leadership skills, after which peer-learning sessions are timetabled. Lecturers provide materials for the tutorials. PAL Supervisors (former PAL leaders) are trained in management techniques, and they conduct observations and coaching of the PAL leaders. Data is gathered each year in the form of student feedback and PAL Leader feedback. Progression and retention rates are compared to the modules before PAL was introduced. This data informs a cycle of continuous improvement each year.

HIGHLIGHT

The initiative's strength lies in its targeted and evidence-based approach to programme implementation. The initiative maintains a strong monitoring system, benchmarking its success against retention rates of an at-risk student cohort. Additionally, it utilises a common support initiative (peer learning) in an innovative and more deeply involved way.

Figure 9: Faculty of Arts Student Workload Balance App at MIC

MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE

FACULTY OF ARTS STUDENT WORKLOAD BALANCE APP

Reducing Barriers

An application for academic staff to track assessment load across subjects on the BA programme and reduce potential stress caused by bunching of assessment load.

Purpose & Implementation

This initiative by the Faculty of Arts is part of a suite of measures to support progression within the Bachelor of Arts programme. There was a recognition at institutional and faculty level that Bachelor of Arts students required additional support to meet their academic responsibilities. Feedback from students suggested that the bunching of assessment load at specific times of the semester was causing stress for some students. The initiative employs a browser-based application designed to help faculty effectively manage and balance student workloads throughout each semester. The browser-based app tracks assessment workload by week/module, the number of students per module, and subject, allowing Heads of Department to input, view and model assessment load against all other subjects within the Bachelor of Arts programme. The application supports a balancing of assessment workload through its modelling and visualisation tools, which alleviates bunching of assessments and promotes better workload planning for students and academics.

KEY FEATURES

- **Programme focus**
- **Identifying and reducing barriers**
- **Technological solutions**

PILOT TO MAINSTREAM AND BEYOND

In 2021/22, discussions were held at faculty level to clarify what would be useful for students and faculty to support the tracking of assessment load. Following the discussions the user and technical requirements for the app were discussed and a pilot specification was developed by the Data Analytics Manager. The pilot was implemented in Autumn of the 2022/23 academic year. Feedback from the pilot phase found that the app added significantly to the ability to model and monitor assessment workload. As a result of its success at pilot stage, the application was fully implemented in the 2023-24 academic year. Further developing the initiative, MIC plan to roll out the app to students so they can track and manage their own assessment load, helping to build their self-regulation skills.

HIGHLIGHT

This initiative highlights the ways in which technological solutions can be found to identified barriers to student progression, including workload stress. .

Figure 10: Connect & Engage Programme at TUS

TECHNOLOGICALUNIVERSITYOF THE SHANNON

CONNECT & ENGAGE PROGRAMME

Transitions

The Connect & Engage Programme is a structured, seven-week initiative designed to support first-year and progressing students as they transition into or continue in higher education.

Purpose & Implementation

The Connect & Engage programme provides a curated series of themed events, workshops, and digital engagement strategies aimed at fostering student well-being, academic success, and social belonging. TUS applies a "Dual Level Engagement Approach" to student retention. This combines supports that benefit all TUS students that are delivered by central services combined with localised measures delivered at the programme level by academic departments. The initiative also represents the first collaborative TUS-wide programme, through which relationships were forged across the new organisation and across legacy student support services teams. The initiative was developed in response to identified challenges faced by first- year and returning students, including difficulties in transitioning to university life, a lack of social and academic engagement, financial support, academic and learning support, and health and mental health support. The Connect & Engage Programme was created to provide a holistic, proactive support system that ensures students feel connected, informed, and supported at TUS. The programme is accessible with both in-person and on-line components, all of which are designed to be inclusive, and engaging, and in keeping with Universal Design principles.

KEY FEATURES

- **Whole of institution**
- **Transitions**
- **Social media**
- **Culture building**

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

A key aspect of the programme is the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and LinkedIn to engage students dynamically. These platforms allow for real-time updates, interactive Q&A sessions, behind-the-scenes insights, and peer-to-peer engagement, ensuring students remain informed and feel connected to the university community. The use of social media provides students with engaging, bite-sized content and fostering a sense of community beyond traditional in-person events.

HIGHLIGHT

The Connect & Engage programme identifies the myriad challenges to progression that students face, and it provides information on services, such as financial literacy, as well as academic success. The holistic approach to information and service provision addresses many causes of non- progression and is based on data and feedback from students and faculty.

7. Conclusion

The 42 case studies presented by Irish HEIs demonstrate that student progression remains a high priority for the Irish HE sector. The breadth of intervention types proposed, as well as their diversity and reach, further communicated a strong commitment among HEIs to innovation. This commitment was particularly relevant, given a sectoral context characterised by institutional transformation, the widely varying rates of non-progression across and within the HE sector, and significant changes for the student experience and the academic lifecycle.

While many of these changes are welcome, they challenge HEIs to design and implement evidence-based interventions for student progression. For example, a focus on transitions may have less salience as programme pathways become more complex and the number and types of transition increase for a more diverse student cohort. These shifts have relevance also for how student progression and non-progression are conceived and measured at the HEI level, and also the strategies adopted to reduce high non-progression rates. HEIs have responded to this challenge by adopting new perspectives on student progression and by putting the latest evidence into practice.

Through the analysis of the case studies, commonalities, trends, differences and gaps in intervention types were drawn out and explored. These revealed both the importance of undertaking a situational analysis of the individual HEI setting and of designing interventions for clearly defined strategic goals. As might be expected, there were important differences between the approaches adopted by HEIs according to their type, their culture, their catchment, and their student cohort characteristics. These characteristics correlated with progression rates and, therefore, strategic decision-making with respect to intervention types. Drawing on the analysis, a number of key themes were identified on a cross-case basis. In the discussion section, these were modelled to underpin the inter-relationships and main processes involved for any HEI planning an intervention to support student retention and progression.

The report concludes that the qualitative information provided in case study format is highly valuable and generates lessons of use to an Irish HEI considering ways to support student retention and progression. As a next step, it would be useful to focus in more detail on some practices — reducing non-progression through targeting and use of individual student action plans, institution-level policies, strengthening monitoring and evaluation frameworks, applying an implementation lens, and considering resourcing in greater detail. Finally, the analysis and discussion generated a series of insights for future research. The report also illustrates some examples of the submitted case studies in graphic form. On the basis of the case studies presented, there is scope to consider a more wide-ranging approach to demonstrating the interventions described in the case studies relative to the themes that emerged through the analysis.

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Appendix 1: Further Information on Analytic Themes

Analytic themes emerged from the cross-case study analysis of all 42 interventions described in individual case studies. The following provides additional descriptive information on these analytic themes:

Whole-of-institution approach

Whole-of-institution interventions tended to be centrally coordinated, ensuring institutional oversight and alignment with HEI strategic priorities. A key feature of the whole-of-institution approach was a focus on non-academic aspects of student progression and acculturation activity. Moreover, whole-of-institution approaches were associated with leadership policy-making, the definition of specific approaches, strategic priorities, pilots intended for scale-up and supporting local decision-making. Examples included Maynooth University's Exam Results Information Centre Outreach Campaign, and the UL First Seven Weeks (F7W) programme, which offered structured support across multiple faculties. In contrast, programme- or department-level interventions often focused on discipline-specific challenges, such as RCSI's Plus One initiative, which addressed barriers to clinical placements for students with disabilities, or TU Dublin's exam results analysis programme for Access students.

Early intervention model

Early intervention approaches and strategies were recognised as critical for student progression in several of the case studies, with many initiatives targeting new entrants in the first weeks or semester of study. The UL F7W programme exemplifies this approach, providing structured activities to support students during their transition into higher education. Similarly, peer mentoring programmes, such as SETU's P2P initiative, aim to foster early social connections and engagement. These initiatives mix acculturation, socialisation, and academic skills development, and increasingly recognise the importance of all of these pillars to student progression at a first entry cohort level. Other examples of early intervention approaches included those that aim to support core skills, such as language or maths skills. Other interventions focused on later stages of student progression, addressing academic challenges, placement experiences, or exam performance, such as the MTU ALC Summer Programme, which consolidates support services for students repeating assessments.

In short, early intervention approaches had two dimensions. Most typically, they focused on all new entrants early in the first year and adopted a mixed strategy, or they entailed early identification, so as to target those at risk of non-progression. In both cases, tailoring and targeting were key characteristics of early intervention approaches and in practice, often involved improvements in how data on student progression was produced and used.

Piloting innovations

Intended for scaling and mainstreaming, pilot interventions on student progression were common among HEI case studies and could be distinguished from mainstream interventions. Pilot interventions were notable for their reliance on recent evidence as part of their development so that they were recognisably innovative. They demonstrated strong intervention design and specification processes together with a focus on monitoring to support upscaling the intervention on conclusion of the pilot.

Several of the case studies were at the pilot phase, with plans for broader institutional implementation. However, sustainable funding had not always been secured. Examples of pilot interventions included the

University of Galway's Early Alert System (EAS 2.0), which was undergoing refinement before full-scale adoption, and RCSI's Plus One initiative, which was still in its initial evaluation stage. By contrast, mainstream initiatives, such as Trinity College Dublin's Student2Student (S2S) mentoring programme, have, more typically, been fully integrated into institutional structures and are sustained through long-term funding.

Targeted interventions

Targeted initiatives were designed for specific student cohorts and contrasted with initiatives aimed at the whole student body. Targeted programmes, typically, addressed the needs of under-represented or at-risk groups, such as the University of Galway's monitoring of Irish Traveller and Roma students or TU Dublin's support for Access students. By contrast, whole-student-body initiatives, such as the Connect & Engage Programme at TUS, focused on broad student engagement and retention strategies applicable to all incoming students. In addition, and often coupled with early intervention approaches, targeted interventions involved a coordination of effort across multiple student support areas.

Data-led monitoring

Information Technology projects played a significant role in student retention strategies, with HEIs increasingly integrating analytics into their interventions on student progression. These kinds of projects represented interventions in and of themselves, or they were foundational and intended to systematise approaches, such as early intervention or whole-of-institution approaches. DCU's Power BI dashboard and UCD's LEAP programme exemplify this trend, using engagement data to identify students at risk of non-progression as a result of lack of engagement and informed targeted early prevention measures. Other initiatives relied on qualitative feedback, student consultations, or structured mentoring without extensive data integration, such as MIC's Peer Mentoring Project. In the future, it is considered likely that interventions aiming to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to support student retention and progression will be established and might usefully constitute a future case study on this basis.

Enrolment type

Auto-enrolment contrasted with self-selection as a distinct HEI intervention process, reflecting varying approaches to student participation and the ways in which HEIs engage with students. Auto-enrolled programmes ensured universal access, such as structured orientation activities or academic support services embedded within curricula, whereas self-selection initiatives required students to opt in, such as peer mentoring schemes or specialised workshops, which may limit participation but allow for tailored engagement.

Reducing barriers

Reducing barriers to student success was also an important theme in many of the interventions, particularly those addressing social inclusion, financial challenges, and academic accessibility.

RCSI's Universal Design framework for placements and University College Dublin's removal of exam re-sit fees sought to identify and remove existing barriers. Foundational skills development, specifically, for mathematics, could also be positioned within this theme. Other initiatives focused on broader student engagement without explicitly addressing systemic barriers already existing within institutions. One gap noticed here, was that associated with transition from second level to higher education and the lack of

interventions involving collaboration between second-level schools and HEIs. It is possible that HEIs may have excluded access initiatives from the case studies, which also support retention and progression.

Funding source

Many interventions relied on external funding for their interventions, such as the SATLE-funded Thrive Initiative at Maynooth University, which provided resources for student success officers and micro-interns. Other retention and progression initiatives were sustained through core institutional funding, such as Trinity College Dublin's Senior Tutor's Office, which availed of central funding in addition to discretionary allocations. It was notable that new funding sources were often associated with interventions aiming to target other resources better, for example, helping academics and administrators to identify students needing support.

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks

Interventions for their contribution to progression rates varied significantly across the case studies. Some programmes, such as UCC's course-change initiative, explicitly linked their interventions to improved progression outcomes, reporting a 3% increase in first-year retention since implementation. Others, such as Trinity College Dublin's Tutorial Service, provide one-to-one student advocacy supports but do not formally assess the impact of the supports on retention and progression rates. The same is true for DCU's Power BI dashboard initiative. As has been noted through the text, some inconsistencies are in evidence in HEI approaches to monitoring and evaluation. It is not always clear from the information presented in the case studies that interventions are demonstrating impact or that there are result indicators in place sufficient to measure impact into the future.

Appendix 2: List of Invited HEI Participants

No.	Name of Higher Education Institution
1	Atlantic Technological University
2	Dublin City University
3	Dundalk Institute of Technology
4	Institute of Art and Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire
5	Mary Immaculate College
6	Maynooth University
7	Munster Technological University
8	National College of Art & Design
9	RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences
10	South East Technological University
11	Technological University Dublin
12	Technological University of the Shannon
13	Trinity College Dublin
14	University College Cork
15	University College Dublin
16	University of Galway
17	University of Limerick

Appendix 3: Case Study Questionnaire Template and Guidelines

HEA | AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY

Student Progression in Higher Education: Case Studies

The HEA Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education is establishing a national evidence base on student progression. The HEA is inviting HEIs to contribute to this evidence base by completing two forms (reporting templates).

Please complete this form with respect to the **institutional initiative/measure(s)** in place to promote the progression and retention of students (**NFQ levels 6–8, major awards, full-time in-person programmes**) and/or address non-progression rates.

Notes:

- In this context, "institutional" means institution-wide, i.e.
    - applicable to the entire student cohort or to a specific level or year group across the institution; OR otherwise
    - authorised by the institution (i.e. specific initiatives/measures approved by the institution and implemented for/in a specific Faculty/School e.g. STEM).
- Initiatives that are organised locally for a specific programme or discipline are not sought at this time.
- The initiatives/measures described are aimed specifically at promoting student progression/retention or addressing non-progression.
- The template will allow you to include information on up to five initiatives, but the recommended maximum is three.
- Please include no more than one initiative that is specific to new entrants.

Please refer to the accompanying guidelines for further information and definition of terms.

1. Name of institution

Case Study 1

Overview

2. Name of initiative/measure
3. Is the focus of the initiative...
    - to promote progression and retention? Yes/no
    - to address non-progression rates? Yes/no.
4. Title of lead or section responsible for the initiative/measure

5. When was this initiative/measure introduced?
6. Briefly describe the initiative/measure. If relevant, specify the cohorts targeted (e.g. new entrants).

Context
7. Why was this initiative developed?
8. How was this initiative implemented (e.g. informed by data, following consultation, adoption of practice etc.)?

Aims and Objectives
9. Aim of the initiative

Objectives (will relate directly to the aims)

10. Objective 1
    a. Objective
    b. Actions
    c. Expected Outcome
11. Objective 2
    a. Objective
    b. Actions
    c. Expected Outcome
12. Objective 3
    a. Objective
    b. Actions
    c. Expected Outcome

Resourcing
13. How is the overall initiative resourced?

Oversight
14. How is the initiative reviewed or monitored? Is the initiative reported on annually to academic council, university executive team, or another committee? Please explain.

15. Describe the mechanisms in place (if any) to monitor and report on the effectiveness of the initiative.

16. What has been the impact of the initiative to date (how do you know that the initiative has been a success)?

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

18. Additional information (optional). Include a relevant URL if further information is available online.

19. Do you want to describe additional case studies? Yes/No.

Student Progression in Higher Education

Guidelines to support completion of forms to capture information on HEI practices

The HEA is inviting institutions to complete two forms: (i) HEI Data and Interventions and (ii) Case Studies to establish:

- what data are captured and shared across each higher education institution with respect to student progression and retention,
- how data are used,
- what initiatives are in place to promote progression across the student life cycle and/or to address non-progression rates.

These guidelines have been developed to support completion of the forms.

Scope: information to be provided only with respect to full-time in-person programmes offered at NFQ Levels 6–8.

Where the term '**institutional**' is used, it relates to institution-wide initiatives rather than programme-specific initiatives that have been agreed and implemented locally.

Institutions are asked to provide information with respect to:

(i)   **Data** — data captured, considered, shared and reported across the institution rather than at programme/local level.

(ii)   **Interventions/initiatives** — interventions/initiatives in place across the institution i.e. institution-wide rather than in place for a specific programme or discipline. Examples include initiatives targeting all new entrants regardless of programme or all second-year students or international students across all programmes etc.

(iii)   **Initiatives/interventions** in place that have been **agreed at institutional level**. This includes initiatives that are not necessarily aimed at all students; however, they have been considered by a central authority e.g. an academic committee of Council. For example, the institution has decided to specifically address STEM non-progression rates.

(iv)   **Case studies** — it is recommended that no more than one case study is provided for new entrants. This is to capture the range of initiatives/measures that are in place across the student lifecycle.

Definition of Terms

Actions: These are activities undertaken to implement objectives. They represent an attempt to improve a way of working to produce a better outcome. Actions may change or be adapted over the short term in response to external factors or in response to learnings.

Aim/goal: an aim/goal relates to the purpose of an initiative and what it sets out to achieve. An aim/goal should be specific and achievable.

Impact describes the positive effect or change that occurs as a result of a well-executed action and is usually medium to long term.

Evaluation of Impact: Effective evaluation of the impact of an objective goes beyond monitoring (i.e. the ongoing process of systematically collecting data on an outcome to check if an action has been implemented correctly). Evaluating impact involves the systematic assessment of an objective and its design, implementation, and results. Evaluation is concerned with an objective's effectiveness (i.e. did it do what it was intended to do?) and efficiency (i.e. did it do this well?) to assess its impact and sustainability. Therefore, achieving and evidencing impact requires measurable targets, well-managed implementation, and a strategic approach to gathering and evaluating quantitative or qualitative data.

Non-progressed: The HEA definition of non-progressed will apply. A student is deemed to have progressed if they are present in the same institution in the following academic year.

Objective is a succinct statement of a specific aim/goal for performance that the initiative will achieve or attain over the lifetime of that initiative. Objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART).

Outcomes are the results of actions or activities. They reflect the changes that will contribute towards impact. The outcome of an action or activity is an indicator of whether it will be impactful over time. Outcomes may be evaluated in terms of measurable improvement (or sustained performance) in efficiency or effectiveness of activities or actions, e.g. percentage of students from a target group that progress to year 2.

Notes to assist with specific questions in the forms

HEI Data and Interventions form

- **Q3 and Q4** include options for "Year 5" and "Year 6". These options are included because they may be applicable for certain disciplines such as medicine or dentistry. Most programmes within the scope of this reporting template (NFQ Level 6–8) will be of four years duration or less, so the Year 5 and 6 options can be left blank or marked "not applicable". (Note: the undergraduate degree element of integrated Master's programmes, where these are delivered, are within scope.)

- **Q4** asks for the timeframes for which non-progression data for each year cohort are available and are subsequently considered at institutional level (e.g. specific reports are generated and/or the data are considered at an academic committee of Council and/or

by an office or section with responsibility for student progression/non-progression). Please do not select timeframes for data that are not examined at institutional level.

- **Q5** asks about when the data referred to in Q4 are examined. If they are examined at institutional level in the same academic year as they were collected, select "in the same academic year". If they are examined at a later date, i.e. the student cohort in question has since progressed, select "in the following academic year".

  For example, if student progression data are collected at the end of Semester 1 of the current academic year and are examined at a meeting of Academic Council/section with responsibility for student progression at the start of Semester 2, select "in the same academic year". If non-progression data from the commencement of semester 2 are considered by the institution in October (start of a new academic year), select "in the following academic year".

- **Q6** asks whether progression data for specific cohorts are specifically examined at institutional level. "Yes" means that the data for that cohort are specifically isolated and considered as a unit. "No" means that the progression data for that cohort are not specifically isolated and considered as a unit (regardless of whether the data exists or not). "Not applicable" means that there is no such cohort in the institution, e.g. there are no foundation programmes.

- **Q22:** As with Q19, some options can be marked as not applicable rather than included in the ranking.

- **Q26** asks about policies and regulations, not initiatives and measures. Therefore, there should be no need to duplicate information that will be included in the Case Study form.

Case Studies form

- If you wish to include supplemental information on the case study you are describing, please send it as a Word doc or in PDF format to policy@hea.ie.

Once the templates have been returned by Institutions, the HEA will undertake an analysis of the data and prepare a report presenting key findings, trends, and themes arising from the data.